CHARLOTTE'S INHERITANCE

M. E. Braddon

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CHARLOTTE'S INHERITANCE

A Novel

MAXWELL, MARY ELIZABETH (BRADDON)
III

BY THE AUTHOR OF

"LADY AUDLEY'S SECRET," "AURORA FLOYD"
"VIXEN," "ISHMAEL," "WYLLARD'S WEIRD"

ETC. ETC.

Stereotyped Edition

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CHARLOTTE'S INHERITANCE

Book the First.

DE PROFUNDIS.

CHAPTER I.

LENOBLE OF BEAUBOCAGE.

In the days when the Bourbon reigned over Gaul, before the "simple, sensuous, passionate" verse of Alfred de Musset had succeeded the *débonnaire* Muse of Béranger in the affections of young France,—in days when the site of the Trocadero was a remote and undiscovered country, and the word "exposition" unknown in the Academic dictionary, and the Gallic Augustus destined to rebuild the city yet an exile,—a young law-student boarded, in common with other students, in a big dreary-looking house at the corner of the Rue Grande-Mademoiselle, abutting on the Place Lauzun, and within some ten minutes walk of the Luxembourg. It was a very dingy quarter, though noble gentlemen and lovely ladies had once occupied the great ghastly mansions, and disported themselves in the grusome gardens. But the young students were in nowise oppressed by the ghastliness of their abode. They sang their Béranger, and they pledged each other in cheap Bordeaux, and clinked their glasses noisily in their boisterous good-fellowship, and ate the messes compounded for them in a darksome cupboard, known as the kitchen, by old Nanon the cook, purblind, stone-deaf, and all but imbecile, and popularly supposed to be the venerable mother of Madame Magnotte. The youngsters grumbled to each other about the messes when they were unusually mysterious; and it must be owned that there were *vol-au-vents* and *fricandeaux* consumed in that establishment which were awful and wonderful in their nature; but they ventured on no complaint to the mistress of the mansion. She was a grim and terrible personage. Her terms were low, and she treated her boarders *de haute en bas*.

If they were not content with her viands, they might go and find more agreeable viands elsewhere.

Madame Magnotte was altogether mysterious and inscrutable. Some people said that she was a countess, and that the wealth and lands of her family had been confiscated by the committee of public unsafety in '93. Others declared that she had been a popular actress in a small theatre in the days of Napoleon. She was tall and thin—nay, of an exceptional leanness—and her complexion was of a more agreeable yellow than the butter that appeared on her hospitable board; but she had flashing black eyes, and a certain stateliness of gait and grandeur of manner that impressed those young Bohemians, her boarders, with a kind of awe. They talked of her as the "countess," and by that name she was known to all inmates of the mansion; but in all their dealings with her they treated her with unfailing respect.

One of the quietest among the young men who enjoyed the privileges of Madame Magnotte's abode was a certain Gustave Lenoble, a law-student, the only son of a very excellent couple who lived on their own estate, near an obscure village in Normandy. The estate was of the smallest; a dilapidated old house, known in the immediate neighbourhood as "the Château," and very dear to those who resided therein; a garden, in which everything seemed to have run to seed; and about forty acres of the poorest land in Normandy. These possessions constituted the patrimonial estate of François Lenoble, *propriétaire*, of Beaubocage, near Vevinordin, the department of Eure.

The people amongst whom the good man lived his simple life called him M. Lenoble de Beaubocage, but he did not insist upon this distinction; and on sending out his only son to begin the battle of life in the great world of Paris, he recommended the young man to call himself Lenoble, *tout court*.

The young man had never cherished any other design. He was of all creatures the least presuming or pretentious. The father was Legitimist to the very marrow; the son half Buonapartist, half republican. The father and son had quarrelled about these differences of opinion sometimes in a pleasantly disputatious manner; but no political disagreement could lessen the love between these two. Gustave loved his parents as only a Frenchman can venture to love his father and mother—with a devotion for the gentleman that bordered on enthusiasm, with a fond reverence for the lady that was the very essence of chivalry. There was a sister, who regarded her brother Gustave as the embodiment of all that is perfect in youthful mankind; and there were a couple of old house-servants, a very stupid clumsy lad in the stables, and half a dozen old mongrel dogs, born and bred on the premises, who seemed to share the young lady's opinions.

There was not a little discussion upon the subject of Gustave

Lenoble's future career; and it was not without difficulty that the father could be persuaded to approve the choice of a profession which the young man had made. The seigneur of Beaubocage cherished an exaggerated pride of race little suspected by those who saw his simple life, and were pleased by his kindly unaffected manners. The house of Lenoble, at some remote and almost mythical period of history, had distinguished itself in divers ways; and those bygone grandeurs, vague and shadowy in the minds of all others, seemed very real to Monsieur Lenoble. He assured his son that no Lenoble had ever been a lawyer. They had been always lords of the soil, living on their own lands, which had once stretched wide and far in that Norman province; a fact proved by certain maps in M. Lenoble's possession, the paper whereof was worn and yellow with age. They had stooped to no profession save that of arms. One seigneur of Beaubocage had fought under Bayard himself; another had fallen at Pavia, on that great day when all was lost *hormis l'honneur;* another had followed the white plume of the Bernais; another—but was there any need to tell of the glories of that house upon which Gustave was so eager to inflict the disgrace of a learned profession?

Thus argued the father; but the mother had spent her girlhood amidst the clamour of the Buonapartist campaigns, and the thought of war was very terrible to her. The memory of the retreat from Russia was not yet twenty years old. There were men alive to tell the story, to depict those days and nights of horror, that mighty march of death. It was she and her daughter Cydalise who had helped to persuade Gustave that he was born to distinguish himself in the law. They wanted him to study in Paris—the young man himself had a wild desire to enjoy the delights of that wondrous capital—and to return in a few years to set up for himself as *avocat* at the town of Vevinord, some half-dozen leagues from the patrimonial estate. He was created to plead for the innocent, to denounce the guilty, to be grand and brave and fiery-hot with enthusiasm in defence of virtuous peasants charged unjustly with the stealing of sheep, or firing of corn-ricks. It never struck these simple souls that he might sometimes be called upon to defend the guilty, or to denounce the innocent.

It was all settled at last. Gustave was to go to Paris, and enter himself as a student of law. There were plenty of boarding-houses in the neighbourhood of the Ecole de Droit where a young man might find a home; and to one of these Gustave was recommended by a friend of his family. It was the Pension Magnotte to which they had sent him, the big dreary house, *entre cour et jardin,* which had once been so grand and noble. A printer now occupied the lower chambers, and a hand painted

on the wall pointed to the *Pension Magnotte, au premier. Tirez le cordon, s.v.p.*

Gustave was twenty-one years of age when he came to Paris; tall, stalwart, broad of shoulders and deep of chest, with a fair frank face, an auburn moustache, candid, kind blue eyes—a physiognomy rather Saxon than Celtic. He was a man who made friends quickly, and was soon at home among the students, roaring their favourite songs, and dancing their favourite dances at the dancing-places of that day, joining with a pleasant heartiness in all their innocent dissipations. For guilty dissipation the young provincial had no taste. Did he not carry the images of two kind and pure women about with him wherever he went, like two attendant angels ever protecting his steps; and could he leave them sorrowing on thresholds *they* could not pass? Ah, no! He was loud and boisterous and wild of spirits in those early days, but incapable of meanness or vice.

"It is a brave heart," Madame Magnotte said of him, "though for the breaking of glasses a scourge—*un fléau*."

The ladies of the Pension Magnotte were for the most part of mature age and unattractive appearance—two or three lonely spinsters, eking out their pitiful little incomes as best they might, by the surreptitious sale of delicate embroideries, confectioned in their dismal leisure; and a fat elderly widow, popularly supposed to be enormously rich, but of miserly propensities. "It is the widow of Harpagon himself," Madame Magnotte told her gossips—an old woman with two furiously ugly daughters, who for the last fifteen years had lived a nomadic life in divers boarding-houses, fondly clinging to the hope that, amongst so many strange bachelors, husbands for these two solitary ones must at last be found.

These, with a pale young lady who gave music lessons in the quarter, were all the feminine inmates of the mansion; and amongst these Gustave Lenoble was chief favourite. His tender courtesy for these lonely women seemed in some manner an evidence of that good old blood whereof the young man's father boasted. Francis the First, who listened with bent knee and bare head to his mother's discourse, was not more reverential to that noble Savoyarde than was Gustave to the shabby-genteel maiden ladies of the Pension Magnotte. In truth, this young man had a heart pitiful and tender as the heart of woman. To be unfortunate was to possess a sure claim upon his pity and regard; to be poor and friendless was the best appeal to his kindness. He spent his evenings sometimes in the great dreary desert of a salon, and listened respectfully while Mademoiselle Servin, the young music-teacher, played dismal sonatas of Gluck or Grétry on a cracked old piano that had been one of the earliest made of those instruments, and was now attenuated and feeble as the

very ghost of music. He listened to Madame Magnotte's stories of departed splendour. To him she opened her heart as she never had opened it to those other young men.

"They mock themselves of everything—even the religion!" she exclaimed, with horror. "They are Diderots and Holbachs in the bud, less the talent. But you do not come of that gutter in which they were born. You are of the old blood of France, M. Lenoble, and I can trust myself to you as I cannot to them. I, who speak to you—I, too, come of a good old race, and there is sympathy between we others."

And then, after babbling to him of her lost station, the lady would entertain him with some dainty little supper with which she was wont to indulge herself and her lady boarders, when the students—who were treated something after the manner of schoolboys—were out of doors.

For four years the law-student had enjoyed his Parisian life—not altogether idle, but not altogether industrious—amusing himself a great deal, and learning very little; moderate in his expenditure, when compared with his fellow-students, but no small drain upon the funds of the little family at home. In sooth, this good old Norman family had in a pecuniary sense sunk very low. There was real poverty in the tumble-down house at Beaubocage, though it was poverty that wore a cheerful face, and took things pleasantly. A very humble English farmer would have despised the income which supported M. Lenoble's household; and it was only the economy and skill of the matron and her daughter which sustained the dignity of the small establishment.

There was one great hope cherished alike by the proud simple-minded old father, the fond mother, the devoted sister, and that was the hope in the grand things to be done, in the dim future, by Gustave, the son, the heir, the pole-star of the household.

Out of poverty, out of obscurity, into the broad light of honour and riches, was the house of Lenoble to be lifted by this young law-student. On the broad shoulders of this modern Atlas the Lenoble world was to be sustained. To him they looked, of him they thought, in the long dreary winter evenings during which the mother nodded over her knitting, the father slept in his capacious easy-chair, the sister toiled at her needlework by her little table of *palissandre*.

He had paid them more than one visit during his two years of study, bringing with him life and light and gladness, as it seemed to the two women who adored him; and now, in the winter of 1828, they expected another visit. He was to be with them on the first day of the new year. He was to stay with them till his mother's fête—the 17th of January.

The father looked to this special visit with an unusual anxiety. The mother too was more than ever anxious. The sister, if she

who loved her brother with a somewhat morbid intensity could be more anxious than usual, was more so now. A dreadful plot, a dire conspiracy, of which Gustave was to be the subject and victim, had been concocted beneath that innocent-seeming roof. Father, mother, and sister, seated round the family hearth, fatal as some domestic Parcæ, had hatched their horrid scheme, while the helpless lad amused himself yonder in the great city, happily unconscious of the web that was being woven to enmesh him.

The cord which monsieur unwound, the mesh which madame held, the needle which dexterous mademoiselle wielded, were employed in the fabrication of a matrimonial net. These unsophisticated conspirators were bent upon bringing about the marriage of their victim, a marriage which should at once elevate and enrich the Lenobles of Beaubocage, in the person of Gustave.

François Lenoble's best friend and nearest neighbour was a certain Baron Frehlter, of Germanic origin, but for some generations past naturalised to the Gallic soil. The Baron was proprietor of an estate which could show ten acres for one of the lands of Beaubocage. The Baron boasted a family tree which derived its root from a ramification of the Hohenzollern pedigree; but, less proud and more prudent than the Lenobles, the Frehlters had not scorned to intermingle their Prussian blue blood with less pure streams of commercial France. The *épicier* element had prevailed in the fair brides of the house of Frehlter for the last three or four generations, and the house of Frehlter had considerably enriched itself by this sacrifice of its family pride.

The present Baron had married a lady ten years his senior, the widow of a Rouen merchant, alike wealthy and pious, but famous rather for these attributes than for any personal charm. One only child, a girl, had blessed this union. She was now a young person of something under twenty years of age, newly emerged from her convent, and pining for some share in the gaieties and delights of a worldly paradise, which had already been open to many of her schoolfellows.

Mademoiselle Frehlter's companions had, for the most part, left school to be married. She had heard of the *corbeille*, the wedding dress, the wedding festivities, and occasionally a word or two about that secondary consideration the bridegroom. The young lady was therefore somewhat inclined to take it ill of her father that he had not secured for her the *éclat* of an early marriage. Her departure from the convent of the Sacré Cœur, at Vevinord, was flat and tame to an extreme degree. The future lay before her, a dreary desert of home life, to be spent with a father who gorged himself daily at a greasy and savoury banquet, and who slept away the greater part of his existence; and with a mother who divided her affections between a disagreeable poodle and a still more disagreeable priest—a

priest who took upon himself to lecture the demoiselle Frehlter on the smallest provocation.

The château of the Frehlters was a very grand abode as compared to the tumble-down house of Beaubocage; but it was cold and stony to a depressing degree, and the furniture must have been shabby in the days of the Fronde. Faithful old servants kept the mansion in a state of spotless purity, and ruled the Baron and his wife with a rod of iron. Mademoiselle execrated these devoted retainers, and would have welcomed the sauciest of modern domestics who would have released her from the bondage of these servants of the old school.

Mademoiselle had been at home a year—a year of discontent and ill-humour. She had quarrelled with her father, because he would not take her to Paris; with her mother, because she would not give her more new gowns and bonnets and feathers and furbelows; with the priest, the poodle, with the autocracy below-stairs, with everybody and everything. So at last the Baron decided that mademoiselle should marry, whereby he might be rid of her, and of her complaints, vagaries, ill-tempers, and general dissatisfaction.

Having once made up his mind as to the wisdom of a matrimonial arrangement, Baron Frehlter was not slow to fix upon a bridegroom. He was a very rich man, and Madelon was his only child, and he was furthermore a very lazy man; so, instead of looking far afield for a wealthy or distinguished suitor for his daughter, he was inclined to take the first that came to hand. It is possible that the Baron, who was of a somewhat cynical turn of mind, may have cherished no very exalted idea of his daughter's attractions, either personal or mental. However this might be, it is certain that when the demoiselle had ill-treated the poodle, and insulted the priest, and quarrelled with the cook—that high-priestess of the kitchen who alone, in all Normandy, could concoct those messes which the Baron loved—the master of Côtenoir decided on marrying his heiress out of hand.

He communicated this design to his old crony, François Lenoble, one day when the Beaubocage family dined at Château Côtenoir.

"I think of marrying my daughter," he said to his friend, when the ladies were safely out of hearing at the other end of the long dreary saloon. "Now thy son Gustave is a fine fellow—brave, handsome, and of a good race. It is true he is not as rich as Madelon will be by-and-by; but I am no huckster, to sell my daughter to the best bidder" ("and I doubt if there would be many bidders for her, if I were so inclined," thought the Baron, in parenthesis); "and if thy son should take a fancy to her, and she to him, it would please me well enough, friend François."

Friend François pricked up his ears, and in his old eyes flickered a feeble light. Côtenoir and Beaubocage united in the person of his son Gustave! Lenoble of Beaubocage and Côtenoir —Lenoble of Côtenoir and Beaubocage! So splendid a vision had never shone before his eyes in all the dreams that he had dreamed about the only son of whom he was so proud. He could not have shaped to himself so bold a project as the union of those two estates. And here was the Baron offering it to him, with his snuff-box, *en passant.*

"It would be a great marriage," he said, "a very great marriage. For Gustave I can answer without hesitation. He could not but be charmed by such a union—so amiable a bride would enchant him."

He looked down the room to the spot where Madelon and Cydalise were standing, side by side, admiring Madame Frehlter's poodle. Madelon could afford to be civil to the poodle before company. The contrast between the two girls was sufficiently striking. Cydalise was fair and bright-looking—Mademoiselle Frehlter was square and ungainly of figure, swarthy of complexion, dark of brow.

"He could not but be charmed," repeated the old man, with feeble gallantry.

He was thinking of the joining together of Beaubocage and Côtenoir; and it seemed a very small thing to him that such a union of estates would involve the joining of a man and woman, who were to hold to each other and love each other until death should part them.

"It shall be no marriage of convenience," said the Baron, in a generous spirit; "my daughter is somewhat ill-tem—that is to say, my daughter finds her life somewhat dull with her old father and mother, and I think she might be happier in the society of a husband. I like your son; and my wife, too, likes him better than any other young man of our acquaintance. Madelon has seen a good deal of him when she has been home from the convent in her holidays, and I have reason to think she does not dislike him. If he likes her and she likes him, and the idea is pleasing to you and madame, we will make a match of it. If not, let it pass; we will say no more."

Again the seigneur of Beaubocage assured his friend that Gustave would be enchanted with the proposal; and again it was of Côtenoir that he thought, and not of the heart or the inclinations of his son.

This conversation took place late in autumn, and at the new year Gustave was to come. Nothing was to be said to him about his intended wife until he arrived; that was a point upon which the Baron insisted.

"The young man may have fallen in love with some fine young person in Paris," he said; "and in that case we will say nothing

to him of Madelon. But if we find him with the heart free, and inclined to take to my daughter, we may give him encouragement."

This was solemnly agreed between the two fathers. Nor was Mademoiselle Frehlter to be told of the matrimonial scheme until it ripened. But after this dinner at Côtenoir the household at Beaubocage talked of little else than of the union of the two families. What grandeur, what wealth, what happiness! Gustave the lord of Côtenoir! Poor Cydalise had never seen a finer mansion than the old château, with its sugar-loaf towers and stone terraces, and winding stairs, and tiny inconvenient turret chambers, and long dreary salon and *salle-à-manger* She could picture to herself nothing more splendid. For Gustave to be offered the future possession of Côtenoir was as if he were suddenly to be offered the succession to a kingdom. She could not bring herself to consider that Madelon was neither agreeable nor attractive, and that, after all, the wife must count for something in every marriage contract. She could see nothing, she could think of nothing, but Côtenoir. The glory and grandeur of that estate absorbed every other consideration.

No one of those three conspirators feared any opposition on the part of their victim. It was just possible that Gustave might have fallen in love with some Parisian damsel, though his letters gave no hint of any such calamity. But if such a misfortune had happened, he would, of course, fall out of love again, return the damsel her troth and obtain the return of his own, and straightway offer the second-hand commodity to Mademoiselle Frehlter.

The object of all these cares and hopes and dreams arrived at last, full of life and spirits, with plenty to tell about Paris in general, and very little to tell about himself in particular. The women questioned him unmercifully. They insisted on a graphic description of every female inmate of the boarding-house, and would scarcely believe that all except the little music-mistress were elderly and unattractive. Of the music-mistress herself they were inclined to be very suspicious, and were not altogether reassured by Gustave's assertion that she was neither pretty nor fascinating.

"She is a dear, good, industrious little thing," he said, "and works harder than I do. But she is no miracle of beauty; and her life is so dreary that I often wonder she does not go into a convent. It would be gayer and pleasanter for her than to live with those old women at the Pension Magnotte."

"I suppose there are many beautiful women in Paris?" said Cydalise, bent upon knowing the worst.

"Well, I dare say there are," Gustave answered frankly; "but we students don't see much of them in our quarter. One sees a

pretty little milliner's girl now and then, or a washerwoman. In short, there are a good many grisettes in our part of the world," added the young man, blushing, but for no sin of his own. "We get a glimpse of a handsome woman sometimes, rattling past in her carriage; but in Paris handsome women do not go on foot. I have seen prettier girls at Vevinord than in Paris."

Cydalise was enchanted with this confession.

"Yes," she exclaimed, "our Normandy is the place for pretty girls. Madelon Frehlter, for example, is not she a very—amiable girl?"

"I dare say she's amiable enough," answered Gustave; "but if there were no prettier girls than Mademoiselle Frehlter in this part of the world, we should have no cause to boast. But there are prettier girls, Cydalise, and thou art thyself one of them."

After this speech the young man bestowed upon his sister a resounding kiss. Yes; it was clear that he was heart-whole. These noisy, boisterous good spirits were not characteristic of a lover. Even innocent Cydalise knew that to be in love was to be miserable.

From this time mother and sister tormented their victim with the merits and charms of his predestined bride. Madelon on the piano was miraculous; Madelon's little songs were enchanting; Madelon's worsted-work was a thing to worship; Madelon's devotion to her mother and her mother's poodle was unequalled; Madelon's respectful bearing to the good Abbé St. Velours—her mother's director—was positively beyond all praise. It was virtue seraphic, supernal. Such a girl was too good for earth—too good for anything except Gustave.

The young man heard and wondered.

"How you rave about Madelon Frehlter!" he exclaimed. "She seems to me the most commonplace young person I ever encountered. She has nothing to say for herself; she never appears to know where to put her elbows. I never saw such elbows; they are everywhere at once. And her shoulders!—O heaven, then, her shoulders!—it ought to be forbidden to wear low dresses when one has such shoulders."

This was discouraging, but the schemers bore up even against this. The mother dwelt on the intellectual virtues of Madelon; and what were shoulders compared to mind, piety, amiability—all the Christian graces? Cydalise owned that dear Madelon was somewhat *gauche;* Gustave called her *bête.* The father remonstrated with his son. Was it not frightful to use a word of the barracks in connection with this charming young lady?

At last the plot revealed itself. After a dinner at Côtenoir and a dinner at Beaubocage, on both which occasions Gustave had made himself very agreeable to the ladies of the Baron's house-

hold—since, indeed, it was not in his nature to be otherwise than kind and courteous to the weaker sex—the mother told her son of the splendid destiny that had been shaped for him. It was a matter of surprise and grief to her to find that the revelation gave Gustave no pleasure.

"Marriage was the last thing in my thoughts, dear mother," he said, gravely; "and Madelon Frehlter is the very last woman I should think of for a wife. Nevertheless, I am gratified by the honour Monsieur le Baron has done me. That goes without saying."

"But the two estates!—together they would make you a great proprietor. You would not surely refuse such fortune?"

Cydalise gave a little scream of horror.

"Côtenoir! to refuse Côtenoir! Ah, surely that would be impossible! But figure to yourself, then, Gustave——"

"Nay, Cydalise, you forget the young lady goes with the château; a fixture that we cannot dispense with."

"But she, so amiable, so pious——"

"So plain, so stupid——"

"So modest, so charitable——"

"In short, so admirably adapted for a Sister of Charity," replied Gustave. "But no, dear Cydalise. Côtenoir is a grand old place; but I would as soon spend my life at Toulon, dragging a cannon-ball at my heels, as in that dreary salon where Madame Frehlter nurses her maladies and her poodle, and where the good-humoured, easy-going old Baron snores away existence. 'Tis very well for those elderly folks, you see, my sister, and for Madelon—for hers is an elderly mind in a youthful body; but for a young man full of hope and gaiety and activity—bah! It would be of all living deaths the worst. From the galleys there is always the hope of escaping—an underground passage, burrowed out with one's finger-nails in the dead of the night—a work lasting twenty years or so, but with a feeble star of hope always glimmering at the end of the passage. But from the salon, and mamma, and the poodle, and the good, unctuous, lazy old director, and papa's apoplectic snoring, and the plaintive little songs and monotonous embroideries of one's wife, there would be no escape. Ah, bah!"

Gustave shuddered, and the two women shuddered as they heard him. The prospect was by no means promising; but Madame Lenoble and her daughter did not utterly despair. Gustave's heart was disengaged. That was a great point; and for the rest, surely persuasion might do much.

Then came that phenomenon seen very often in this life—a generous-minded, right-thinking young man talked into a position which of all others is averse from his own inclinations. The mother persuaded, the sister pleaded, the father dwelt

dismally upon the poverty of Beaubocage, the wealth of Côte-noir. It was the story of auld Robin Gray reversed. Gustave perceived that his refusal to avail himself of this splendid destiny would be a bitter and lasting grief to these people who loved him so fondly—whom he loved as fondly in return. Must he not be a churl to disappoint hopes so unselfish, to balk an ambition so innocent? And only because Madelon was not the most attractive or the prettiest of women!

The young man stood firm against all their arguments, he was unmoved by all their pleading. It was only when his anxious kindred had given up the battle for lost that Gustave wavered. Their mute despair moved him more than the most persuasive eloquence; and the end was submission. He left Beaubocage the plighted lover of that woman who, of all others, he would have been the last to choose for his wife. It had all been settled very pleasantly—the dowry, the union of the two estates, the two names. For six months Gustave was to enjoy his freedom to finish his studies; and then he was to return to Normandy for his marriage.

"I have heard very good accounts of you from Paris," said the Baron. "You are not like some young men, wild, mad-brained. One can confide in your honour, your steadiness."

The good folks of Beaubocage were in ecstacies. They congratulated Gustave—they congratulated each other. A match so brilliant would be the redemption of the family. The young man at last began to fancy himself the favoured of the gods. What if Madelon seemed a little dull—a little wanting in that vivacity which is so pleasing to frivolous minds? she was doubtless so much the more profound, so much the more virtuous. If she was not bright and varied and beautiful as some limpid fountain dancing in summer sunlight, she was perhaps changeless and steady as a rock; and who would not rather have the security of a rock than the summer-day beauty of a fountain?

Before Gustave departed from his paternal home he had persuaded himself that he was a very lucky fellow; and he had paid Mademoiselle Frehlter some pretty little stereotyped compliments, and had listened with sublime patience to her pretty little stereotyped songs. He left the young lady profoundly impressed by his merits; he left his own household supremely happy; and he carried away with him a heart in which Madelon Frehlter's image had no place.

CHAPTER II.

IN THIS WIDE WORLD I STAND ALONE.

GUSTAVE went back to his old life, and was not much disturbed by the grandeur of his destiny as future seigneur of Côtenoir and Beaubocage. It sometimes occurred to him that he had a weight upon his mind; and, on consideration, he found that the weight was Madelon Frehlter. But he continued to carry the burden very lightly, and his easy-going student life went on, unbroken by thoughts of the future. He sent polite messages to the demoiselle Frehlter in his letters to Cydalise; and he received from Cydalise much information, more graphic than interesting, upon the subject of the family at Côtenoir; and so his days went on with pleasant monotony. This was the brief summer of his youth; but, alas, how near at hand was the dark and dismal winter that was to freeze this honest joyous heart! That heart, so compassionate for all suffering, so especially tender for all womankind, was to be attacked upon its weaker side.

It was Gustave Lenoble's habit to cross the gardens of the Luxembourg every morning, on his way from the Rue Grande-Mademoiselle to the Ecole de Droit. Sometimes, when he was earlier than usual, he carried a book with him, and paced one of the more obscure alleys, reading for an odd half-hour before he went to the daily mill-grinding in the big building beyond those quiet gardens.

Walking with his book one morning—it was a volume of Boileau, which the student knew by heart, and the pages whereof did not altogether absorb his attention—he passed and repassed a bench on which a lady sat, pensive and solitary, tracing shapeless figures on the ground with the point of her parasol. He glanced at her somewhat carelessly the first time of passing, more curiously on the second occasion, and the third time with considerable attention. Something in her attitude—helplessness, hopelessness, nay indeed, despair itself, all expressed in the drooping head, the listless hand tracing those idle characters on the gravel—enlisted the sympathies of Gustave Lenoble. He had pitied her even before his gaze had penetrated the cavernous depths of the capacious bonnet of those days; but one glimpse of the pale plaintive face inspired him with compassion unspeakable. Never had he seen despair more painfully depicted on the human countenance—a despair that sought no sympathy, a sorrow that separated the sufferer from the outer world. Never had he seen a face so beautiful, even in despair. He could have fancied it the face of Andromache, when all that made her world had been reft from her: or of

Antigone, when the dread fiat had gone forth—that funeral rites or sepulture for the last accursed scion of an accursed race there were to be none.

He put Boileau into his pocket. That glimpse of a suffering human mind, which had been unconsciously revealed to him, possessed an interest more absorbing than the grandest flight of poet and satirist. As he passed for the fifth time, he looked at the mournful lady still more searchingly, and this time the sad eyes were lifted, and met his pitying looks. The beautiful lips moved, and murmured something in tones so tremulous as to be quite unintelligible.

The student took off his hat, and approached the lady, deferential as knight-errant of old awaiting the behest of his liege mistress.

"In what can I have the happiness to be agreeable to you, madame?"

"You are very good, monsieur," murmured the lady in very decent French, but with an accent unmistakably foreign—English, as Gustave opined. "I—I—am quite a stranger in Paris, and—and—I have heard there are numerous lodging-houses in this quarter—where one may obtain a lodging—cheaply. I have asked several nursemaids, and other women, in the gardens this morning; but they seem very stupid, and can tell me nothing; and I do not care to ask at the hotel where I am staying."

Gustave pondered. Yes, there were many lodgings, he informed the lady. And then he thought of Madame Magnotte. Was it not his duty to secure this stray lodger for that worthy woman, if possible?

"If madame has no objection to a boarding-house——" he began.

Madame shook her head. "A boarding-house would suit me just as well," she said; "but it must not be expensive. I cannot afford to pay much."

"I know of a boarding-house very near this place, where madame might find a comfortable home on very reasonable terms. It is, in point of fact, the house in which I myself reside," added Gustave, with some timidity.

"If you will kindly direct me to the house——" said the lady, looking straight before her with sad unseeing eyes, and evidently supremely indifferent as to the residence or non-residence of M. Lenoble in the habitation referred to.

"Nay, madame, if you will permit me to conduct you there. It is but a walk of five minutes."

The stranger accepted the courtesy with a gentle indifference that was not ingratitude, but rather incapacity for any feeling except that one great sorrow which seemed to absorb her mind

Gustave wondered what calamity could thus overwhelm one so young and beautiful.

The lady was quite silent during the little walk from the gardens to the Rue Grande-Mademoiselle, and Gustave observed her attentively as he walked by her side. She was evidently not more than four-and-twenty years of age, and she was certainly the prettiest woman he had ever seen. It was a fair delicate English beauty, a little worn and faded, as if by care, but idealized and sublimated in the process. At her brightest this stranger must have been strikingly beautiful; in her sorrow she was touchingly lovely. It was what Gustave's countrymen call a *beauté navrante*.

Gustave watched her, and wondered about her. The dress she wore was sufficiently elegant, but had lost the gloss of newness. Her shawl, which she carried as gracefully as a Frenchwoman, was darned. Gustave perceived the neat careful stitches, and divined the poverty of the wearer. That she should be poor was no subject for surprise; but that she, so sorrowful, so lonely, should seek a home in a strange city, was an enigma not easy to solve.

To Madame Magnotte Gustave introduced the stranger. She gave just one look round the dreary saloon; but to Gustave's fancy that one look seemed eloquent. "Ah me!" it said; "is this the fairest home I am to find upon this inhospitable earth?"

"She does not seem to belong to this world," the young man thought, as he went back to the garden where he had found his fair stranger, having been very coolly dismissed by Madame Magnotte after his introduction had been made.

And then M. Lenoble, being of a romantic turn of mind, remembered how a lady had been found by a student sitting on the lowest steps of the guillotine, desolate and helpless, at night; and how the student had taken her home and sheltered her, and had straightway fallen desperately in love with her, to discover, with unutterable horror, that her head had been severed from her fair shoulders by the cruel knife twelve hours before, and that her melancholy loveliness was altogether phantasmal and delusive.

Was this English stranger whom Gustave had found in the gardens of the Luxembourg twin sister to that ghostly lady of the familiar legend? Her despair and her beauty seemed to him greater than earthly sorrow or earthly beauty; and he was half inclined to wonder whether she could be of the same race as Madelon Frehlter. And from this hour the sense of a weight upon his mind, before so vague and intermittent, became an enduring oppression, not to be shaken off by any effort of his will.

All through that day he found himself thinking more of the unknown Englishwoman than was consistent with a strict performance of his duties. He was vexed with himself on account of this foolish distraction of mind.

"What a frivolous fellow I must be," he said to himself, "to dwell upon such a trifle! This comes of leading such a monotonous life."

At dinner he looked for the lady; but she did not appear at the long table, where the shrill old ladies, the epicurean old bachelors, the noisy students, daily devoured and grumbled at the four or five courses which old Nanon developed out of her inner consciousness and a rather scantily furnished larder. He questioned Madame Magnotte after dinner, and was told that the lady was in the house, but was too tired to dine with the other inmates.

"I have to thank thee for a new boarder, my friend," she said. "Madame Meynell will not pay largely; but she seems a quiet and respectable person, and we shall doubtless be well pleased with each other."

"Madame Meynell!" repeated Gustave, congratulating himself on finding that the Englishwoman was an inhabitant of the house he lived in. "She is a widow, I suppose?"

"Yes, she is a widow. I asked that question, and she answered, yes. But she told me nothing of her late husband. She is not at all communicative."

This was all Gustave could obtain from Madame Magnotte. She was not communicative. No; she was, indeed, scarcely less silent than that ghostly lady who had been found sitting at the foot of the guillotine. There was some kind of mystery involved in her sorrowful face, her silent apathy. It was possibly the fact of this mystery which interested M. Lenoble. Certain it is that the young man's interest had been aroused by this unknown Englishwoman, and that his mind was more occupied by the image of her whom he had seen but once than by that of his plighted wife.

He waited anxiously for the next day; but on the next day Madame Meynell still pleaded fatigue and illness. It was only on the third day that she appeared at the noisy banquet, pale, silent, absent-minded, sheltering herself under the wing of Madame Magnotte, who was disposed to be kind to this helpless stranger. To Gustave the young English widow seemed like a ghost at that crowded board. He looked at her every now and then from his distant seat, and saw her always with the same hopeless far-away look in her sad eyes. He himself was silent and *distrait*.

"Of what dost thou dream, my droll one?" said his nearest neighbour. "Thou art positively insupportable."

M. Lenoble could not become vivacious or entertaining at the behest of his fellow-student. The consciousness of that strange pale face haunted and oppressed him. He hoped to have a few minutes' talk with the English lady after dinner, but she disappeared before the removal of those recondite preparations which in the Pension Magnotte went by the generic name of "dessert."

For more than a week she appeared thus at the dinner-table, eating very little, speaking not at all, except such monosyllabic replies as the hostess now and then extorted from her pale lips. A creature at once so beautiful and so profoundly sad became an object of interest to others besides Gustave; but in no breast was the sympathy which her sadness and beauty excited so poignant as in his. Her face haunted him. The familiar pleasures and amusements became distasteful to him. He spent his evenings at home in the dismal salon, and was content to listen to the chatter of the old women, the little music-mistress's dreary sonatas, the monotonous roll of wheels on the distant quay—anything rather than the hackneyed round of student-life that had once been agreeable to him. He did not fail to write his weekly letter to Cydalise; but, for some reason or other, he refrained from any allusion to the English stranger, although it was his custom to relate all his adventures for the amusement of the family at Beaubocage.

An evening came at last on which Madame Meynell was persuaded to remain with the other ladies after dinner.

"It must be very cold and cheerless for you in your bedroom," said Madame Magnotte; "why not spend your evening with us, in a pleasant and social manner?"

"You are very good, madame," murmured the Englishwoman, in the slow timid accents that had so plaintive a sound to Gustave's ear; "if you wish it, I will stay."

She seemed to submit rather from utter weakness and inability to refuse anything asked of her than from any hope of finding pleasure in the society of the Magnotte salon.

It was an evening in March—cold, blustrous, dreary. The east wind blew clouds of dust athwart the Rue Grande-Mademoiselle, and the few foot-passengers in that dull thoroughfare looked pinched and wretched. The old ladies gathered round the great black stove, and gossipped in the twilight; the music-mistress went to her feeble piano, and played, unasked, unheeded; for Gustave, who was wont to turn the leaves, or sit attentive by the piano, seemed this evening unconscious of the music. Madame Meynell sat in one of the windows, alone, half-hidden by the faded yellow damask curtains, looking out into the street.

Something—some impulse which he tried to resist, but could

not—drew Gustave towards that lonely figure by the window. He went close up to the strange lady. This evening, as in the gardens of the Luxembourg, she seemed to him a living statue of despair. Now, as then, he felt an interest in her sorrow which he was powerless to combat. He had a vague idea that even this compassionate sympathy was in some manner an offence against Madelon Frehlter, the woman to whom he belonged, and yet he yielded to the fatal weakness.

"Yes, I belong to her," he said to himself; "I belong to Madelon Frehlter. She is neither pretty nor fascinating; but I have every reason to believe her very good, very amiable; and she is the only woman, except those of my own kindred, in whom I have any right to be interested."

He did not say this in so many words; but this was the shape which his thoughts assumed as he yielded to the tempter, and walked straight to the distant window by which Madame Meynell had seated herself.

She started slightly as he approached her, and then looked up and recognized him as her acquaintance of the Luxembourg.

"Good evening, monsieur," she said; "I have to thank you for having helped me to find a comfortable home."

Having said this in a low gentle voice, she looked out into the street once more with her mournful unseeing eyes. It was evident that she had no more to say to M. Lenoble.

The student, however, had no idea of leaving the window just yet, although he knew—yes, knew—that his presence there was a wrong done to Madelon Frehlter; but a wrong so small, so infinitesimal, that it was really not worth consideration.

"I am enchanted to think that I was of some slight service to you, madame," he said; "but I fear you will find this quarter of Paris very dull."

She did not take any notice of this remark until Gustave had repeated it, and then she spoke as if suddenly awakened from a trance.

"Dull?" she said. "No, I have not found it dull. I do not care for gaiety."

After this M. Lenoble felt that he could say no more. The lady relapsed into her waking trance. The dust-clouds in the silent street seemed more interesting to her than M. Lenoble of Beaubocage. He lingered a few minutes in the neighbourhood of her chair, thoughtfully observant of the delicate profile, the pale clear tints of a complexion that had lost its bloom but not its purity, the settled sadness of the perfect mouth, the dreamy pensiveness of the dark-grey eye, and then was fain to retire.

After this, the English widow lady spent many evenings in Madame Magnotte's salon. The old Frenchwoman gossipped and wondered about her; but the most speculative could fashion

no story from a page so blank as this joyless existence. Even slander could scarcely assail a creature so unobtrusive as the English boarder. The elderly ladies shrugged their shoulders and pursed up their lips with solemn significance. There must needs be something—a secret, a mystery, sorrow, or wrong-doing—somewhere; but of Madame Meynell herself no one could suspect any harm.

Gustave Lenoble heard little of this gossip about the stranger, but she filled his thoughts nevertheless. The vision of her face came between him and his work; and when he thought of the future, and of the damsel who had been allotted to him for a wife, his thoughts were very bitter.

"Fate is like Laban," he said to himself; "a man works and does his duty for seven years, and then Fate gives him Leah instead of Rachel. No doubt Leah is a very good young woman; one has no complaint to make against her, except that she is not Rachel."

This was not a hopeful manner of looking at things for the destined master of Côtenoir. M. Lenoble's letters to the anxious folks at Beaubocage became, about this time, somewhat brief and unsatisfactory. He no longer gave ample details of his student-life—he no longer wrote in his accustomed good spirits. His letters seemed stiff and constrained.

"I am afraid he is studying too much," said the mother.

"I daresay the rascal is wasting his time in dissipation," suggested the father.

CHAPTER III.

"PAST HOPE, AND IN DESPAIR."

Two months had elapsed since the bleak spring morning on which Gustave Lenoble found the solitary lady under the leafless trees of the Luxembourg gardens. The inmates of the Pension Magnotte had grown accustomed to her presence, to her silence, her settled sadness, and troubled themselves no further respecting herself or her antecedents. The lapse of time had brought no improvement to her spirits; indeed, Gustave, who watched her closely, perceived that she had grown paler and thinner since that March morning when he met her in the public garden. Her life must have been painfully monotonous. She very rarely went out of doors, and on no occasion ventured beyond the gardens of the Luxembourg. No one visited her. She neither wrote nor received any letters. She was wont to make a pretence of reading as she sat in her retired corner of the salon; but Gustave had discovered that she gave little attention to her book. The open volume in her hand seemed no more than an excuse for brooding upon her sorrows.

If people, prompted by curiosity or by compassion, endeavoured to get into conversation with this lonely lady, the result was always the same. She would answer their questions in a low gentle voice, with a quiet politeness; but she never assisted them in the smallest degree to interchange thoughts with her. It seemed as if she sought neither friend nor sympathizer, or as if her case was so entirely hopeless as to admit of neither. She paid for her board and lodging weekly with a punctilious exactness, though weekly payments were not the rule of the house.

"My movements are uncertain," she said to Madame Magnotte. "I cannot tell how long I may be with you. It will therefore be better for me to pay you weekly."

She had been in the house two months, dining every day at the public table, spending all her evenings in the public saloon; and during that time her settled gloom had never been broken by any outburst of grief or passion. She might have been a creature of ice, a statue of despair modelled in snow by a Michael Angelo. But one night the ice melted, the statue of snow became in a moment a passionate, grief-stricken woman.

It was one bright evening late in May. Ah, how near at hand was the appointed date of those nuptials to which the household of Beaubocage looked forward with supreme happiness! The old ladies of the Pension Magnotte were for the most part out of doors. The long saloon was almost empty. There were only Gustave, Madame Magnotte, and the little music-mistress, who sat at her piano, with the western sunlight shining full upon her, rosy-hued and glorious, surrounding her with its soft radiance until she looked like a humble St. Cecilia.

Madame Meynell had seated herself close to the piano, and was listening to the music. Gustave hovered near, pretending to be occupied with a limp little sheet of news published that evening.

Mademoiselle Servin, the teacher of music, upon this occasion deserted her favourite masters. She seemed in a somewhat dreamy and sentimental humour, and played tender little melodies and simple plaintive airs, that were more agreeable to Gustave than those grand examples of the mathematics of counterpoint which she so loved to interpret.

"You like this melody of Grétry's," said the music-mistress, as M. Lenoble seated himself close to the piano. "I do not think you care for classic sonatas—the great works of Gluck, or Bach, or Beethoven?"

"No," replied the young man frankly; "I do not care about anything I can't understand. I like music that goes to one's heart."

"And you, too, Madame Meynell, like simple melodies?" mademoiselle asked of that lady, who was not wont to come so

near the little piano, or to pay so much attention to Mademoiselle Servin's performance.

"O yes," murmured the Englishwoman, "I like such music as that."

"And you, too, think that Beethoven never composed simple plaintive airs—for example," exclaimed the pianist, playing softly while she spoke. "You think he wrote only sonatas, quartettes, fugues, grand operas, like *Fidelio*. Have you never heard this by your scientific Beethoven?"

Hereupon she played "Hope told a flattering tale," with much tenderness and delicacy. Her two hearers listened, mute and deeply moved. And then from that familiar melody she glided softly into another, most musical, most melancholy, which has been set to some of the sweetest verses that Thomas Moore ever composed:

> "Those evening bells, those evening bells!
> How many a tale their music tells
> Of youth and home, and that sweet time
> When last I heard their soothing chime!"

All the world sang the verses of Ireland's divine bard in those days. The song was one which the Englishwoman had sung years ago in a happy home. What recollections, what associations, were evoked by that plaintive melody, who shall say? The words came back with the music to which they have been eternally wedded. The words, their mournful meaning, the faces of the friends amongst whom she had last sung them, the picture of the peaceful home whose walls had echoed the music,—all these things arose before her in a vision too painfully vivid; and the lonely boarder at the Pension Magnotte covered her face with her hands, and sobbed aloud.

The passion of tears lasted but a minute. Madame Meynell dried her eyes, and rose to leave the room.

"Do not question me," she said, perceiving that her two companions were about to offer her their sympathy. "I cannot tell you the memories that were conjured up by that music. It brought back a home I shall never see again, and the faces of the dead—worse than dead to me—and the happiness I have lost, and the hopes and dreams that once were mine. Oh, I pray God I may never hear that melody again."

There was a passion, a depth of feeling, in her tone quite new to Gustave Lenoble. He opened the door for her without a word, and she passed out of the salon quietly, like a ghost—the ghost of that bright young creature who had once borne her shape, and been called by her name, in a pleasant farmhouse among the Yorkshire wolds.

"Ah, but how that poor soul must have suffered!" cried the sympathetic Mademoiselle Servin, as the door closed on the

Englishwoman. "I did not think it was in her to feel so deeply. I thought she was stone, and now I begin to think it must be of such stone as Niobe—the petrification of despair."

Upon Gustave Lenoble this scene made a profound impression. He lay awake during the greater part of that night, thinking of the lonely lady's tears and anguish. The music of "Those evening bells" pervaded his dreams. He rose unrefreshed, feverish, forgetful of Côtenoir and Madelon Frehlter, as if that place and that person had never emerged from the shapeless substances of chaos. He wanted to see *her* again, to console her, if that were possible. Oh, that it might be his privilege to console her! He pitied her with a compassion so intense, that thus to compassionate her woes, was himself to suffer a poignant anguish. He pitied her. Yes, he told himself again and again that this sentiment which so absorbed his heart and mind was no more than pity. But oh, if this were pity, what were love? *That* was a question which also presented itself to the mind of M. Gustave Lenoble, of Beaubocage *in esse*, and Côtenoir *in posse*.

Madame Meynell rarely appeared at the common breakfast in the grim dining-room of the Pension Magnotte. Gustave was therefore in nowise surprised to miss her on this particular morning. He took a cup of coffee, and hurried off to his daily duties. There was a fever on him which he could neither understand nor shake off, and he hastened to the gardens of the Luxembourg, as if there were some special necessity for speed. So do men often hasten unconsciously to their predestined doom, defiant of augury. Soothsayers may menace, and wives may dream dreams; but when his hour comes, Cæsar will go to the appointed spot where the daggers of his assassins await him.

In the alley where he had first looked upon her sad face, beneath the umbrage of young limes and chestnuts just bursting into bloom, he saw the Englishwoman to-day, seated on the same bench, almost in the same attitude.

He went up to her, and bade her good morning; and then, intensely conscious of his own temerity, seated himself by her side.

"I did not expect to find you here so early."

"No, I seldom come out so soon; but this morning I have to make some inquiries upon a matter of business, and I am only resting here before going to make them."

She gave a little weary sigh at the end of this speech. It seemed a strange manner of transacting business to rest in the Luxembourg gardens, which were distant but a few hundred yards from her home. Gustave divined that it was for very forlornness she lingered there, shrinking from some difficult encounter that lay before her.

"Can I not make the inquiries for you?" he asked. "Pray command me. It will be my happiness to be useful to you."

"You are very good. I cannot trouble you so much."

"Pray do not talk of trouble. It can be no trouble to me to aid you in any manner. Ah, madame, you do not know how much I would sacrifice to be useful to you!"

She must have been dull indeed had she failed to perceive the earnestness of his tone. She did perceive it, and was vaguely conscious that in this student of law she had a friend.

"I want to know when the diligence for Calais leaves Paris, and from what office," she said. "I am going back to England."

She was surprised to see the young man's face blanch as she announced this simple fact. The young man himself was surprised by the sudden anguish inflicted by her announcement. It was in this moment that he first discovered how completely he had given his heart into this strange woman's keeping.

"You are really going to leave Paris?—for ever?" he exclaimed.

"Yes. I have been here too long already. I have no business here. I ought to have gone back to England that day when I first met you here, but I put off the day of my return. I can put it off no longer."

"And you are going back to your friends?" Gustave asked, in a very mournful tone.

"I am going back to my friends? Yes!" Her lips quivered a little, and the unbidden tears came to her eyes.

Ah, what was the sorrow that oppressed this beauteous lonely creature? What agony of grief or self-reproach was this pain which consumed her? Gustave remembered her passion of tears on the previous night; her talk of friends that were dead, and happiness lost; and now to-day she talked of going home to her friends: but O the bitterness of expression with which she had spoken that word "friends!"

"Are you going alone, Madame Meynell?" he inquired, after a pause. He could not tear himself from that seat by her side. He could not be manly or rational where she was concerned. The image of Madelon Frehlter rose before his mental vision, reproachful, menacing; but a thick fog intervened to obscure that unwelcome image. His whole life resolved itself into those thrilling moments in which he sat here, on this common garden bench, by this stranger's side; the entire universe was contracted into this leafy walk where they two sat.

"Yes, I am going alone," madame replied, with a little laugh. "Who should I have to go with me? I am quite alone in the world. I think I had better make these inquiries myself, M. Lenoble. There is no reason why I should give you so much trouble."

"There is no such thing as trouble. I will bring you all necessary information to-day at dinner, if that will be soon enough."

"Quite soon enough, I thank you, monsieur," she answered, with a sigh. "I must ask you kindly to ascertain for me also the expense of the journey."

"Most certainly, madame."

This request set him wondering whether she were poor, and how poor. But she had evidently no more to say to him; she had again become impenetrable. He would fain have stayed, though honour and conscience were clamorous in their demands for his departure. Happily for honour and conscience, the lady was silent as death, impervious as marble; so M. Lenoble presently bowed and departed.

He thought of her all day long. The farce of pity was ended. He knew now that he loved this Englishwoman with an affection at once foolish and sinful,—foolish, since he knew not who or what this woman was; sinful, since the indulgence of this passion involved the forfeiture of his plighted word, the disappointment of those who loved him.

"No, no, no," he said to himself; "I cannot do this base and wicked thing. I must marry Madelon. All the hopes of my mother and father rest on that marriage; and to disappoint them because this stranger's face has bewitched me? Ah, no, it cannot be. And even if I were willing to trample my honour in the dust, how do I know that she would value or accept the sacrifice?"

M. Lenoble made all necessary inquiries at the office of the Messageries, and carried the intelligence to Madame Meynell. He could see that she winced a little when he told her the cost of the journey, which in those days was heavy.

"She must certainly be poor," he said to himself; and it rent his heart to think that even in this paltry matter he could be of no use to her. The destined master of Beaubocage and Côtenoir was entirely without ready money. He had his watch. He put his hand upon that clumsy timekeeper as he talked to madame.

"*Je te porterai chez ma tante, mon gars,*" he said to himself. But he doubted whether the high priests of the pious mountain —the Dordona of Pauperism—would advance much upon this antique specimen of the watchmaker's art.

After this evening he looked forward daily, hourly, to the anguish of her departure. She would vanish out of his life, intangible as a melted snow-flake, and only memory would stay behind to tell him he had known and loved her. Why should this be so hard to bear? If she stayed, he dared not tell her she was dear to him; he dared not stretch forth his hand to help her. In all the world there was no creature more utterly apart

from him than she, whether she lived in the same house with him or was distant as the Antipodes. What did it matter, then, since she was destined to disappear from his life, whether she vanished to-day or a year hence? He argued with himself that it could be a question of no moment to him. There was a death-blow that must descend upon him, cruel, inevitable. Let it come when it would.

Every day when he came home to dinner, M. Lenoble expected to behold a vacant place by the side of his hostess; every day he was pleasantly disappointed. The pale hopeless face was still to be seen, ghost-like, at that noisy board. The face was more pale, more hopeless, as it seemed to Gustave, every day he looked upon it.

He asked Madame Magnotte when the English lady was going to leave, but she could not tell.

"She talks of leaving from day to day," said madame; "it will no doubt be soon. I am sorry to lose her. She is very gentle, and gives no trouble to any one. But she is sad—ah, how sad she is! She has suffered, monsieur."

Gustave agreed to this. Yes, she had suffered; but what, and how?

He watched her closely, but she was always the same. She no longer spent her evenings in the salon, but in her own apartment. He saw her only at dinner-time, and had no opportunity of speaking to her.

At last the day came upon which he missed her at the usual hour. He sat through the tedious meal without speaking; eating a little, drinking a little, mechanically, but with no consciousness of what he ate or drank. There was a mist before his eyes, a confusion of voices in his ears; but the faculties of sight and hearing seemed suspended. The agony he suffered during that miserable hour was bitter as death.

"O, my God, how I love her!" he said to himself, while Raoul's bass roar brayed in his ear on one side, and Leon's shrill squeal tortured him on the other.

He made his way to Madame Magnotte directly after dinner.

"She is gone?" he exclaimed.

"But who, my friend? Ah, yes; it is of that poor Madame Meynell you speak. How you are interested in her! No, she is not gone, poor woman. She remains always. She has the air of a person who knows not her own mind. Yet I am sure she thinks of going. To-day, for the first time, she has been writing letters. Reine came to tell me she had seen her occupied in her own room for the first time. It is not her habit to occupy herself."

Gustave's heart gave a great jump. She was not gone; he might see her again—if it were but a glimpse of her pale face

looking out of the diligence as it drove out of the Cour de Messageries. One look, one glance; it would be something to carry in his heart all his life. All his life! He looked forward and shuddered. What a dreary life it must needs be! Côtenoir, Beanbocage, Madelon, the law; to plead, to read papers, to study dryasdust books. He shrank appalled from the contemplation of that dreary desert of existence—a life without her.

She had been writing letters—doubtless letters to her friends to announce her return. Her departure must be very near at hand.

Gustave refused to go out that evening. His fellow-students were bent on a night's pleasure at a dancing-garden then in vogue, where there would be twinkling lamps and merry music under the May moon. The lamp-lit parterres, the joyous waltzes, had no attractions for Gustave Lenoble. He haunted the dull salon, dim and dreary in the twilight; for Madame Magnotte was chary of lamps and candles, and prolonged to its utmost limits the pensive interval between day and night. He walked softly up and down the room, unheeded by the ladies clustered in a group by one of the windows. Restless and unhappy, he could neither go nor stay. She was not coming down to the salon this evening. He had clung to the faint hope that she might appear; but the faint hope died away in his breast as the night deepened. What purpose could be served by his remaining in that dismal room? He was no nearer *her* than he would have been in the remotest wilds of Central America. He would go out—not to the odious dancing-garden, but to the cool dark streets, where the night wind might blow this fever from his brain.

He left the room suddenly, and hurried downstairs. At the bottom of the staircase he almost stumbled against a woman, who turned and looked at him in the light of a little oil-lamp that hung over the door of the portress's lodge.

It was the Englishwoman, deadly pale, and with a wild look in her face that Gustave had never seen there before. She gave him no sign of recognition, but passed out of the courtyard, and walked rapidly away. That unusual look in her face, the strangeness of the fact that she should be leaving the house at this hour, inspired him with a vague terror, and he followed her, not stealthily, without a thought that he was doing any wrong by such an act—rather, indeed, with the conviction that he had a right so to follow her.

She walked very quickly—at a more rapid pace than Gustave would have supposed possible for so fragile a creature. She chose the loneliest streets, and Gustave had no difficulty in following her; she never looked back, but went straight on her

course, without pause or slackening of her pace, as if with a settled purpose.

"Where can she be going?" Gustave asked himself; and an answer, vague, hideous, terrible, suggested itself to his mind. The idea that occurred to him was one that would scarcely have occurred to an Englishman under the same circumstances, but to a Frenchman it was a very familiar idea.

It was dark now—the darkness that reigns between early sunset and late moonrise. As the lonely woman went farther along the dreary streets parallel with the quay, the dreadful suspicion grew stronger in Gustave's mind. From that instant he had but one thought; in that moment he put away from him for ever all sense of obligation to Madelon Frehlter; he shook off father, mother, sister, old associations, home ties, ambition, fortune—he lived alone for this woman, and the purpose of his life was to save her from despair and death.

They emerged upon the quay at last. The long stretch of pavement was deserted. Ah, now she looked back—she looked on every side with wild unseeing eyes—and now there could be little doubt as to the purpose that brought her here. She crossed the road, and went upon the bridge, Gustave following close; in the next minute she was standing on the stone bench, a tremulous, fluttering figure, with arms stretched towards the water; in a breath she was clasped to Gustave's breast, clasped by arms that meant to hold her for ever.

The shock of that surprise utterly unnerved the wretched creature. She shivered violently, and struggled to free herself from those strong arms.

"Let me go!" she cried in English. "Let me go!" And then, finding herself powerless, she turned and looked at her captor. "M. Lenoble! O, why do you persecute me? Why do you follow me?"

"Because I want to save you."

"To save me! To snatch me back when I was going to find rest—an end for my weary life! O yes, I know that it is a sinful end; but my life has been all sin."

"Your life all sin! Foolish one, I will never believe that."

"It is true," she cried, with passionate self-reproach. "The sin of selfishness, and pride, and disobedience. There is no fate too hard for me—but, O, my fate is very hard! Why did you keep me from that river? You do not know how miserable my life is—you do not know. I paid my last penny to Madame Magnotte this morning. I have no money to take me back to England, even if I dared go there—and I dare not. I have prayed for courage, for strength to go back, but my prayers have not been heard; and there is nothing for me but to die.

What would be the sin of my throwing myself into that river? I must die; I shall die of starvation in the streets."

"No, no," cried Gustave passionately; "do you think I have dragged you back from death to give you to loneliness and despair? My dear one, you are mine—mine by right of this night. These arms that have kept you from death shall shelter you,—ah, let them shelter you! These hands shall work for you. My love, my love! you cannot tell how dear you are to me. If there must be want or trouble for either of us, it shall come to me first."

He had placed her on the stone bench, bewildered and unresisting, and had seated himself by her side. The fragile figure, shivering still, even in the mild atmosphere of the spring night, was sustained by his encircling arm. He felt that she was his, irrevocably and entirely—given to him by the Providence which would have seemed to have abandoned her, but for the love it had implanted for her in this one faithful heart. His tone had all the pleading tenderness of a lover's, but it had something more—an authority, a sense of possession.

"Providence sent me here to save you," he said, with that gentle yet authoritative tone; "I am your providence, am I not, dearest? Fate made me love you—fondly, hopelessly, as I thought. Yesterday you seemed as far away from me as those pale stars, shining up yonder—as incomprehensible as that faint silvery mist above the rising moon—and to-night you are my own."

He knew not what ties might be broken by this act. He had indeed a vague consciousness that the step which he was now taking would cause a lifelong breach between himself and his father. But the time had gone by in which he could count the cost.

"Let me go back, M. Lenoble," the Englishwoman said presently. The faintness of terror was passing away, and she spoke almost calmly. "Let me go back to the house. It is you that have saved me from a dreadful sin. I promise you that I will not again think of committing that deadly sin. I will wait for the end to come. Let me go, my kind friend. Ah, no, no; do not detain me! Forget that you have ever known me."

"That is not in my power. I will take you back to the Pension Magnotte directly; but you must first promise to be my wife."

"Your wife! O, no, no, no! That is impossible."

"Because you do not love me," said Gustave, with mournful gravity.

"Because I am not worthy of you."

Humiliation and self-reproach unspeakable were conveyed in those few words.

"You are worth all the stars to me. If I had them in my

hands, those lamps shining up there, I would throw them away, to hold you," said the student passionately. "You cannot understand my love, perhaps. I seem a stranger to you, and all I say sounds wild and foolish. My love, it is true as the heaven above us—true as life or death—death that was so near you just now. I have loved you ever since that bleak March morning on which I saw you sitting under the leafless trees yonder. You held me from that moment. I was subjugated—possessed—yours at once and for ever. I would not confess even to myself that my heart had resigned itself to you; but I know now that it was so from the first. Is there any hope that you will ever pay me back one tithe of my love?"

"You love me," the Englishwoman repeated slowly, as if the words were almost beyond her comprehension,—"you love *me*, a creature so lost, so friendless! Ah, but you do not know my wretched story!"

"I do not ask to know it. I only ask one question—will you be my wife?"

"You must be mad to offer your name, your honour to me."

"Yes, I am mad—madly in love. And I am waiting for your answer. You will be my wife? My angel, you will say yes! It is not much that I offer you—a life of uncertainty, perhaps even of poverty; but a fond and constant heart, and a head and hands that will work for you while God gives them strength. It is better than the river."

All that was thoughtless and hopeful in his disposition was expressed in these words. The woman to whom he pleaded was weakened by sorrow, and the devotion of this brave true heart brought her strength, comfort, almost hope.

"Will you be my friend?" she said gently. "Your words seem to bring me back to life. I wanted to die because I was so wretched, so lonely. I have friends in England—friends who were once all that is dear and kind; but I dare not go to them. I think a cruel look from one of those friends would kill me with a pain more bitter than any other death could give. And I have no right to hope for kind looks from them. Yours are the only words of friendship I have heard for a long time."

"And you will give me the right to work for you—to protect you? You will be my wife?"

"I would rather be your servant," she answered, with sad humility. "What right have I to accept so great a sacrifice? What folly can be so foolish as your love for me—if it is indeed love, and not a wild fancy of to-night!"

"It is a fancy that will last my life."

"Ah, you do not know how such fancies change."

"I know nothing except that mine is changeless. Come, my love, it is growing late and cold. Let me take you home. The

portress will wonder. You must slip past her quietly with your veil down. Did you give old Margot your key when you came down stairs to-night?"

"No, it is in my pocket. I was not thinking—I——"

She stopped with a sudden shudder. Gustave understood that shudder; he also shuddered. She had left her room that night possessed by the suicide's madness; she had left it to come straight to death. Happily his strong arm had come between her and that cruel grave by which they were still lingering.

They walked slowly back to the Rue Grande-Mademoiselle under the light of the newly-risen moon. The Englishwoman's wasted hand rested for the first time on M. Lenoble's arm. She was his—his by the intervention and by the decree of Providence! That became a conviction in the young man's mind. He covered her late return to the house with diplomatic art, engaging the portress in conversation while the dark figure glided past in the dim lamplight. On the staircase he paused to bid her good night.

"You will walk with me in the Luxembourg garden to-morrow morning, dearest," he said. "I have so much to say—so much. Until then, adieu!"

He kissed her hand, and left her on the threshold of her apartment, and then went to his own humble bachelor's chamber, singing a little drinking song in his deep manly voice, happy beyond all measure.

They walked together next day in the gardens of the Luxembourg. The poor lonely creature whom Gustave had rescued seemed already to look up to him as a friend and protector, if not in the character of a future husband. It was no longer this fair stranger who held possession of Gustave; it was Gustave who had taken possession of her. The stronger nature had subjugated the weaker. So friendless, so utterly destitute—penniless, helpless, in a strange land, it is little matter for wonder that Susan Meynell accepted the love that was at once a refuge and a shelter.

"Let me tell you my wretched story," she pleaded, as she walked under the chestnut-trees by her lover's side. "Let me tell you everything. And if, when you have heard what an unhappy creature I am, you still wish to give me your heart, your name, I will be obedient to your wish. I will not speak to you of gratitude. If you could understand how debased an outcast I seemed to myself last night when I went to the river, you would know how I must feel your goodness. But you can never understand—you can never know what you seem to me."

And then in a low voice, and with infinite shame and hesitation, she told him her story.

"My father was a tradesman in the city of London," she said. "We were very well off, and my home ought to have been a happy one. Ah, how happy such a home would seem to me now! But I was idle and frivolous and discontented in those days, and was dissatisfied with our life in the city because it seemed dull and monotonous to me. When I look back now and remember how poor a return I gave for the love that was given to me—my mother's anxiety, my father's steady, unpretending kindness—I feel how well I have deserved the sorrows that have come to me since then."

She paused here, but Gustave did not interrupt her. His interest was too profound for any conventional expression. He was listening to the story of his future wife's youth. That there could be any passage in that history which would hinder him from claiming this woman as his wife was a possibility he did not for a moment contemplate. If there were shame involved in the story, as Madame Meynell's manner led him to suppose there must be, so much the worse was it for him, since the shame must be his, as she was his.

"When my father and mother died, I went into Yorkshire to live with my married sister. I cannot find words to tell you how kind they were to me—my sister and her husband. I had a little money left me by my father, and I spent the greater part of it on fine dress, and on foolish presents to my sister and her children. I was happier in Yorkshire than I had been in London; for I saw more people, and my life seemed gayer and brighter than in the city. One day I saw a gentleman, the brother of a nobleman who lived in the neighbourhood of my sister's house. We met by accident in a field on my brother-in-law's farm, where the gentleman was shooting; and after that he came to the house. He had seen my sister before, and made some excuse for renewing his acquaintance. He came very often, and before long he asked me to marry him; and I promised to be his wife, with my sister's knowledge and consent. She loved me so dearly, and was so proud of me out of her dear love, that she saw nothing wonderful in this engagement, especially as Mr. Kingdon, the gentleman I am speaking of, was a younger son, and by no means a rich man."

Again she stopped, and waited a little before continuing her story. Only by a gentle pressure of the tremulous hand resting on his arm did Gustave express his sympathy.

"I cannot tell you how happy I was in those days—so bright, so brief. I cannot tell you how I loved Montague Kingdon. When I look back to that time of my life, it seems like a picture standing out against a background of darkness, with some strange vivid light shining upon it. It was arranged between Montague and my sister that we should be married

as soon as his brother, Lord Durnsville, had paid his debts. The payment of the debts was an old promise of Lord Durnsville's, and an imprudent marriage on his brother's part might have prevented the performance of it. This is what Montague told my sister Charlotte. She begged him to confide in her husband, my kind brother-in-law, but this he refused to do. There came a day very soon after this when James Halliday, my brother-in-law, was told about Montague Kingdon's visits to the farm. He came home and found Mr. Kingdon with us; and then there was a dreadful scene between them. James forbade Mr. Kingdon ever again to set foot in his house. He scolded my sister, he warned me. It was all no use. I loved Montague Kingdon as you say you love me—foolishly, recklessly. I could not disbelieve or doubt him. When he told me of his plans for our marriage, which was to be kept secret until Lord Durnsville had paid his debts, I consented to leave Newhall with him to be married in London. If he had asked me for my life, I must have given it to him. And how should I disbelieve his promises when I had lived only amongst people who were truth itself? He knew that I had friends in London, and it was arranged between us that I was to be married from the house of one of them, who had been my girlish companion, and who was now well married. I was to write, telling her of my intended journey to town; and on the following night I was to leave Newhall secretly with Montague Kingdon. I was to make my peace with my sister and her husband after my marriage. How shall I tell you the rest? From the first to last he deceived me. The carriage that was, as I believed, to have taken us to London, carried us to Hull. From Hull we crossed to Hamburg. From that time my story is all shame and misery. I think my heart broke in the hour in which I discovered that I had been cheated. I loved him, and clung to him long after I knew him to be selfish and false and cruel. It seemed to be a part of my nature to love him. My life was not the kind of life one reads of in novels. It was no existence of splendour and luxury and riot, but one long struggle with debt and difficulty. We lived abroad—not for our pleasure, but because Mr. Kingdon could not venture to appear in England. His brother, Lord Durnsville, had never promised to pay his debts. That was a falsehood invented to deceive my sister. For seven long weary years I was his slave, a true and faithful slave; his nurse in illness, his patient drudge at all times. We had been wandering about France for two years, when he brought me to Paris; and it was here he first began to neglect me. O, if you could know the dreary days and nights I have spent at the hotel on the other side of the river, where we lived, you would pity me."

"My dear love, my heart is all pity for you," said Gustave.

"Do not tell me any more. I can guess the end of the story. There came a day in which neglect gave place to desertion."

"Yes; Mr. Kingdon left me one day without a warning word to break the blow. I had been waiting and watching for him through two weary days and nights, when there came a letter to tell me he was on his way to Vienna with a West Indian gentleman and his daughter. He was to be married to the daughter. It was his poverty, he told me, which compelled this step. He advised me to go back to my friends in Yorkshire. To go back!—as if he did not know that death would be easier to me. There was a small sum of money in the letter, on which I have lived since that time. When you first met me here, I had not long received that letter."

This was the end of her story. In the depth of her humiliation she dared not lift her eyes to the face of her companion; but she felt his hand clasp hers, and knew that he was still her friend. This was all she asked of Providence.

To Gustave Lenoble the story had been unutterably painful. He had hoped to hear a tragedy untarnished by shame, and the shame was very bitter to him. This woman whom he loved so fondly was no spotless martyr, the victim of inevitable fate, beautiful and sublime in her affliction. She was only a weak vain, village beauty who had suffered herself to be lured away from her peaceful home by the falsehoods of a commonplace scoundrel.

The story was common, the shame was common, but it seemed to M. Lenoble that the woman by his side was his destiny; and then, prompt to the rescue of offended pride, of outraged love—tortured to think that she, so distant and pure a creature to him, should have been trampled in the dust by another—came the white-winged angel Pity. By her weakness, by her humiliation, by the memory of her suffering, Pity conjured him to love her so much the more dearly.

"My darling," he said softly, "it is a very sad story, and you and I will never speak of it again. We will bury the memory of Montague Kingdon in the deepest grave that was ever dug for bitter remembrances; and we will begin a new life together."

This was the end of M. Lenoble's wooing. He could not speak of his love any more while the sound of Montague Kingdon's name had but lately died away on Susan Meynell's lips. He had taken her to himself, with all her sorrows and sins, in the hour in which he snatched her from death; and between these two there was no need of passionate protestations or sentimental rapture.

M. Lenoble speedily discovered that the law had made no provision for the necessities of a chivalrous young student

eager to unite himself with a friendless foreign woman, who could not produce so much as one of the thirty witnesses required to establish her identity. A very little consideration showed Gustave that a marriage between him and Susan Meynell in France was an impossibility. He explained this, and asked her if she would trust him as she had trusted Montague Kingdon. In Jersey the marriage might easily be solemnised. Would she go with him to Jersey, to stay there so long as the English law required for the solemnization of their union?

"Why should you take so much trouble about me?" said Susan, in her low sad voice. "You are too good, too generous. I am not worth so much care and thought from you."

"Does that mean that you will not trust me, Susanne?"

"I would trust you with my life in a desert, thousands of miles from the rest of mankind—with a happier life than mine. I have no feeling in my heart but love for you, and faith in you."

After this the rest was easy. The lovers left the Pension Magnotte one bright summer morning, and journeyed to Jersey, where, after a fortnight's sojourn, the English Protestant church united them in the bonds of matrimony.

Susan was a Protestant, Gustave a Catholic, but the difference of religion divided them no more than the difference of country. They came back to Paris directly after the marriage, and M. Lenoble took a very modest lodging for himself and his wife in a narrow street near the Pantheon—a fourth story, very humbly furnished. M. Lenoble had provided for himself an opportunity of testing the truth of that adage which declares that a purse large enough for one is also large enough for two.

CHAPTER IV.

A DECREE OF BANISHMENT.

After those stormy emotions which accompany the doing of a desperate deed, there comes in the minds of men a dead calm. The still small voice of Wisdom, unheard while Passion's tempest was raging, whispers grave counsel or mild reproof; and Folly, who, seen athwart the storm-cloud, sublime in the glare of the lightning, seemed inspiration, veils her face in the clear, common light of day.

Let it not for a moment be supposed that with M. Lenoble time and reflection brought repentance in their train. It was not so. The love which he felt for his English wife was no

capricious emotion; it was a passion deep and strong as destiny The worst that afterthought could reveal to him was the fact that the step he had taken was a very desperate one. Before him lay an awful necessity—the necessity of going to Beaubocage to tell those who loved him how their air-built castles had been shattered by this deed of his.

The letters from Cydalise—nay, indeed, more than one letter from his mother, with whom letter-writing was an exceptional business—had of late expressed much anxiety. In less than a month the marriage-contract would be made ready for his signature. Every hour's delay was a new dishonour. He told his wife that he must go home for a few days; and she prepared his travelling gear, with a sweet dutiful care that seemed to him like the ministration of an angel.

"My darling girl, can I ever repay you for the happiness you have brought me!" he exclaimed, as he watched the slight girlish figure flitting about the room, busy with the preparations for his journey.

And then he thought of Madelon Frehlter — commonplace, stiff, and unimpressionable—the most conventional of schoolgirls, heavy in face, in figure, in step, in mind even, as it had seemed to him, despite his sister's praises.

He had been too generous to tell Susan of his engagement, of the brilliant prospects he forfeited by his marriage, or the risk which he ran of offending his father by that rash step. But to-night, when he thought of Madelon's dulness and commonness, it seemed to him as if Susan had in manner rescued him from a dreadful fate—as maidens were rescued from sea-monsters in the days of Perseus and Heracles.

"Madelon is not unlike a whale," he thought. "They tell us that whales are of a sagacious and amiable temper,—and Cydalise was always talking of Madelon's good sense and amiablity. I am sure it is quite as easy to believe in the unparalleled virtues of the whale as in the unparalleled virtues of Madelon Frehlter."

His valise was packed, and he departed for Beaubocage, after a sad and tender parting from his wife. The journey was a long one in those days, when no express train had yet thundered across the winding Seine, cleaving its iron way through the bosom of fertile Norman valleys. M. Lenoble had ample time for reflection as he jogged along in the ponderous diligence; and his heart grew more and more heavy as the lumbering vehicle approached nearer to the town of Vevinord, whence he was to make his way to the paternal mansion as best he might.

He walked to Beaubocage, attended by a peasant lad, who carried his portmanteau. The country was very pleasant in the quiet summer evening, but conscious guilt oppressed the

heart and perplexity disturbed the mind of M. Gustave Lenoble, and his spirits were in nowise elevated by the walk.

Lights in the lower chambers gleamed dimly athwart the trim garden at Beaubocage. One faint twinkling candle shone in a little pepper-castor turret, his sister's room. The thought of their glad welcome smote his heart. How could he shape the words that must inform them of their disappointment? And then he thought of the gentle pensive wife in the Parisian lodging, so grateful for his devotion, so tender and submissive, —the wife he had rescued from death and eternal condemnation, as it seemed to his pious Catholic mind. The thought of this dear one gave him courage.

"I owe much to my parents," he thought to himself, "but not the privilege to sell me for money. The marriage they want to bring about would be a sordid barter of my heart and my honour."

In a few minutes after this he was standing in the little salon at Beaubocage, with his mother and sister hanging about him and carressing him, his father standing near, less demonstrative, but evidently well pleased by this unexpected arrival of the son and heir.

"I heard thy voice in the hall," cried Cydalise, "and flew down from my room to welcome thee. It seems to me that one can fly on these occasions. And how thou art looking well, and how thou art handsome, and how I adore thee!" cries the damsel, more ecstatic than an English sister on a like occasion. "Dost thou know that we began to alarm ourselves about thee? Thy letters became so infrequent, so cold. And all the while thou didst plot this surprise for us. Ah, how it is sweet to see thee again!"

And then the mother took up the strain, and anon was spoken the dreaded name of Madelon. She too would be glad —she too had been anxious. The prodigal made no answer. He could not speak, his heart sank within him, he grew cold and pale; to inflict pain on those who loved him was a sharper pain than death.

"Gustave!" cried the mother, in sudden alarm, "thou growest pale—thou art ill! Look then, François, thy son is ill!"

"No, mother, I am not ill," the young man replied gravely. He kissed his mother, and put her gently away from him. In all the years of her after-life she remembered that kiss, cold as death, for it was the farewell kiss of her son.

"I wish to speak a few words with you alone, father," said Gustave.

The father was surprised, but in no manner alarmed by this request. He led the way to his den, a small and dingy chamber, where there were some dusty editions of the French classics,

and where the master of Beaubocage kept accounts and garden-seeds and horse-medicines.

When they were gone, the mother and sister sat by one of the open windows, waiting for them. Without all was still. Distant lights glimmered through the summer twilight, the lighted windows of Côtenoir.

"How pleased Madelon will be," said Cydalise, looking towards those glimmering windows. She had really taught herself to believe that the demoiselle Frehlter was a most estimable young person; but she would have been glad to find more enthusiasm, more brightness and vivacity, in her future sister-in-law.

The interview between the father and son seemed long to Madame Lenoble and Cydalise. The two women were curious —nay, indeed, somewhat anxious.

"I fear he has made debts," said the mother, "and is telling thy father of his follies. I know not how they are to be paid, unless with the dowry of Madelon, and that would seem a dishonourable use of her money."

It was half an hour before any sound broke the stillness of that quiet house. Twilight had thickened into night, when there came a banging of doors and heavy footsteps in the hall. The door of the salon was opened, and M. Lenoble came in alone. At the same moment the outer door closed heavily.

M. Lenoble went straight to the open window and closed the Venetian shutters. He went from thence to the second window, the shutters whereof he fastened carefully, while the women stared at him wonderingly, for it was not his habit to perform this office.

"I am shutting out a vagabond," he said, in a cold, cruel voice.

"Where is Gustave?" cried the mother, alarmed.

"He is gone."

"But he is coming back, is he not, directly?"

"Never while I live!" answered M. Lenoble. "He has married an English adventuress, and is no longer any son of mine."

Book the Second.

DOWNHILL.

CHAPTER I.

THE FATE OF SUSAN LENOBLE.

Seven years after that miserable summer night at Beaubocage on which Gustave Lenoble was disowned by his father, a man and woman, with a boy five years of age, were starving in a garret amongst the housetops and chimneys of Rouen. In the busy city these people lived lonely as in a forest, and were as securely hidden from the eyes of all who had ever known them. The man—haggard, dying—cherished a pride that had grown fiercer as the grip of poverty tightened upon him. The woman lived only for her husband and her child.

The man was Gustave Lenoble. The world had gone ill with him since he cast his destiny into the lap of the woman he loved. In all these years no olive-bearing dove had spanned the gulf that yawned between the prodigal and his father. The seigneur of Beaubocage had been marble. A narrow-minded old man, living his narrow life, and nursing one idea with fanatical devotion, was of all men the least likely to forgive. Vain had been the tears and entreaties of mother and sister. The doors of that joyless dwelling on the fertile flats beyond Vevinord were sealed against the offender with a seal not to be broken, even had he come thither to plead for pardon, which he did not.

"My father would have sold me as negro slaves are sold *là-bas*," he said, on those rare occasions when he opened his old wounds, which were to the last unhealed: "I am glad that I escaped the contemptible barter."

He was in very truth glad. Poverty and hardship seemed to him easier to bear than the dreary prosperity of Côtenoir and a wife he could not have loved. The distinguishing qualities of this man's mind were courage and constancy. There are such noble souls born into the world, some to shine with lustre supernal, many to burn and die in social depths, obscure as ocean's deepest cavern.

In his love for the woman he had chosen Gustave Lenoble never wavered. He worked for her, he endured for her, he hoped against hope for her sake; and it was only when bodily strength failed that this nameless foot-soldier began to droop and falter in life's bitter battle. Things had gone ill with him.

He had tried his fate as an advocate in Paris, in Caen, in Rouen—but clients would not come. He had been a clerk, now in one counting-house, now in another, and Susan and he had existed somehow during the seven years of their married life.

They clung to each other with affection that seemed to grow with every new sorrow; nor did love exhibit any inclination to spread his wings and take flight from the window, though poverty came in every day at the door, and sat by the hearth, a familiar companion and inevitable guest.

The mother and sister contrived to help this poor castaway with the veriest scrapings of a miserly household. The old man, soured by his great disappointment, grew sordid and covetous with increasing years, and the lives of the women were hard and hopeless. By little cheats, and petty contrivances, and pitiful falsifications of financial statements, they managed to scrape together a few louis now and then for the struggling exile; and to do this was the sole delight of their patient lives. They contrived also to correspond secretly with Gustave, and were informed of the birth of his son.

"Ah, if thou couldst see how beautiful he is," wrote the father, "this child of pure and true love, thou wouldst no longer regret my breach of faith with Madelon Frehlter. I knew not until now how like infant children are to angels. I knew not how true to nature are the angels in the pictures of Raffaelle and Murillo. Thou knowest the print of Murillo's Assumption; the picture is in the Louvre. If thou canst remember that picture, dear mother, thou hast but to recall the face of one of the cherubim about the feet of our Lady, and thou hast the portrait of my boy. He opens his eyes, and looks at me as I write. Ah! that he and I and my Susanne were with thee in the little salon at Beaubocage—my sister, Susanne, you, and I united round this darling's cradle. He has been born in poverty, but his birth has made us very happy."

The sentiment of this letter was no spurious or transient feeling. For this child Gustave Lenoble evinced an unchanging fondness. It was indeed no part of his nature to change. The little one was his comfort in affliction, his joy during every brief interval of prosperity. When the battle was well nigh fought, and he began to feel himself beaten. His chief anxieties, his ever-returning fears, were for his wife and child.

To Susan the thought of parting from him was a despair too deep for tears. She would have been something less than woman if she had not loved her husband with more than common affection. She watched the change that illness brought in the frank face, the stalwart figure; and little by little the

awful truth came home to her. The hour was at hand in which she must lose him.

"If you could have rest, Gustave, better medical advice, more comforts, you would soon be strong again. I am sure your father would not refuse to forgive you now. Write to him, dearest. Go back to Beaubocage, and let your mother and sister nurse you. I will stay here with the little one. It shall be forgotten that you have a wife and child."

"No, dear one; I will not desert you, even for a day, to buy back my father's love. I would rather be here with you than in the pleasantest home without you. But we must face the future, Susanne; we must be brave and wise, for the little one's sake. You are not so strong that you can afford to trust blindly in your power to protect him by-and-by. I have written a letter to my father. He has proved himself a hard man to me, cruel and obdurate beyond all my fears; but I know he is not altogether heartless. When I am dead, you will take the letter in one hand, the child in the other, and go to Beaubocage. I believe he will adopt the boy, and that the little one will give him the comfort and happiness he hoped from me. He must be very lonely; and I cannot doubt that his heart will melt when he sees the child's face, and hears that he has no longer a son As for yourself, my poor girl, I see for you no hope except in the old Yorkshire home, and the friends you fear to see again."

"I no longer fear them," said his wife, with unwonted energy. "I could not go to them seven years ago; but I can go to them as your wife."

"Ah, thank God, the poor name is worth something for you."

"Yes, dear; and I will go back to them—to-morrow."

"To-morrow!"

"To-morrow, Gustave. I have been selfish and cruel to delay so long. The old dread of seeing my sister's reproachful face has been strong enough to hold me back, when a little courage might have enabled me to help you. The burden has been all on you, and I have done nothing. O, what a wretch I must have been to sit idly by and see you suffer, and make no effort to help you!"

"But, my darling, you have not been idle. You have been the dearest and most industrious of wives, and have helped me to bear my burden. You have done more, dear—you have made my burden pleasant to me."

"I will try to lighten it, Gustave," cried Susan, with excitement. "O, why, why did I never try before! My sister and her husband are well off—rich perhaps. If they are still living, if no cruel changes have come to pass at Newhall, they could help us with a little money. They might even give us a home. I will start for England to-morrow."

"Nay, my dear, you are not strong enough to travel so far alone. It seems, indeed, a happy thought this of your rich relations; but you must not undertake such a journey. You might write."

"No, Gustave, I will trust to no letter; I will go. It will be no pain for me to humble myself for your sake. I will go straight to my sister. I know what a tender compassionate heart it is that I shall appeal to."

There was much discussion; but Susan was resolute. To scrape together the money for the journey she made efforts that were heroic in a nature so weak as hers. She went to the Monte de Piété with the last of her little treasures, that one dear trinket to which she had clung even when hunger was at the door—the gimmal or alliance ring that Gustave had placed upon her finger before God's altar—the double symbolic circlet which bore on one side her name, on the other her husband's. This dearest of all her possessions she surrendered for a few francs, to make up the sum needful for her journey.

What it cost her to do this, what it cost her to tear herself away from her sick husband and her only child, who shall say? There are pangs that cannot be counted, agonies that will come within no calculation—the infinite of pain. She went. Two kind souls, a labourer and his wife, lodgers in the same garret-story, promised to care for and help the invalid and child. There is no desolation in which a child will not find a friend.

The journey was long and fatiguing; the anguish of her poor aching heart almost too much for endurance—a heart so heavy that even hope could scarce flutter it. It was dull damp weather, though in the middle of summer. The solitary traveller caught cold on the journey, and arrived in London in a high fever. Ill, faint, and helpless, the great city seemed to her unspeakably dismal—most stony of all stony-hearted mothers to this wretched orphan. She could go no farther than the darksome city inn where the coach from Southampton brought her. She had come *viâ* Havre. Here she sank prostrate, and had barely sufficient strength to write an incoherent letter to her sister, Mrs. Halliday, of Newhall Farm, near Huxter's Cross, Yorkshire.

The sister came as fast as the fastest coach on the great northern road could carry her. There was infinite joy in that honest sisterly heart over this one sinner's repentance. Fourteen years had gone by since the young city-bred beauty had fled with that falsest of men, and most hardened of profligates, Montague Kingdon; and tidings from Susan were unlooked for and thrilling as a message from the grave.

Alas for the adverse fate of Susan Meynell! The false step of her youth had set her for ever wrong upon life's highway. When kind Mrs. Halliday came, Gustave Lenoble's wife was

past her help; wandering in her mind; a girl again, but newly run away from her peaceful home; and with no thought save of remorse for her misdeeds.

The seven years of her married life seemed to have faded out of her mind. She raved of Montague Kingdon's baseness, of her own folly, her vain regret, her yearning for pardon; but of the dying husband in the garret at Rouen she uttered no word. And so, with her weary head upon her sister's breast, she passed away, her story untold, no wedding-ring on her wasted finger to bear witness that she died an honest man's wife; no letters or papers in her poor little trunk to throw light on the fourteen years in which she had been a castaway.

Mrs. Halliday stayed in London to see the wanderer laid in the quiet city churchyard where her family rested, and where for her was chosen an obscure corner in which she might repose forgotten and unknown.

But not quite nameless. Mrs. Halliday could not leave the grave unmarked by any record of the sister she had loved. The stone above the grave of Gustave's wife bore her maiden name, and the comforting familiar text about the one sinner who repenteth.

CHAPTER II.

FORGIVEN TOO LATE.

For a week of long days and longer nights there was no step sounded on the stair, no opening or shutting of a door in the old dilapidated house where he lay languishing on the brink of an open grave, that did not move Gustave Lenoble with a sudden emotion of hope. But the footsteps came and went, the doors were opened and shut again and again, and the traveller so waited, so hoped for did not return.

The boy—the brave bright son, who seemed to inherit all that was noblest and best in his father's nature—pined for his mother. The man endured a martyrdom worse than the agony of Damiens, the slow tortures of La Barre. What had befallen her? That she could desert him or his child was a possibility that never shaped itself in his mind. *That* drop of poison was happily wanting in his cup; and the bitterness of death was sweet compared to the scorpion-sting of such a supposition.

She did not return. Calamity in some shape had overtaken her—calamity dire as death; for, with life and reason, she could not have failed to send some token, some tidings, to those she loved. The sick man waited a week after the day on which he had begun to expect her return. At the end of that time he rose, with death in his face, and went out to look for her—to look for her in Rouen; for her whom the instinct of his heart

told him was far away from that city—as far as death from life. He went to the Cour de Messageries, and loitered and waited amidst the bustle of arriving and departing diligences, with a half-imbecile hope that she would alight from one of them. The travellers came and went, pushing and hustling him in their selfish haste. When night came he went back to his garret. All was quiet. The boy slept with the children of his good neighbour, and was comforted by the warmth of that strange hearth.

Gustave lit his candle, a last remaining morsel.

"You will last my time, friend," he said, with a wan smile.

He seated himself at the little table, pushed aside the medicine-bottles, searched for a stray sheet of letter-paper, and then began to write.

He wrote to his mother, telling her that death was at hand, and that the time had come in which she must succour her son's orphan child. With this he enclosed a letter to his father—that letter of which he had spoken to his wife, and which had been written in the early days of his illness. This packet he directed to Madame Lenoble, at Beaubocage. There was no longer need for secrecy.

"When those letters are delivered I shall be past blame, and past forgiveness," he thought.

In the morning he was dead.

The neighbours posted the letter. The neighbours comforted and protected the child for two days; and then there came a lady, very sad, very quiet, who wept bitterly in the stillness of that attic chamber where Gustave Lenoble lay; and who afterwards, with a gentle calmness of manner that was very sweet to see, made all necessary arrangements for a humble, but not a mean or ignominious, funeral.

"He was my brother," she said to the good friends of the neighbouring garret. "We did our best to help him, my mother and I; but we little thought how bitterly he wanted help. The brave heart would not suffer us to know that."

And then she thanked them with much tenderness for their charity to the dead man; and with these good people she went on foot through the narrow streets of the city to see her brother laid in his grave.

Until this was done the mournful lady, who was not yet thirty years of age, and of a placid nun-like beauty, abandoned herself to no transport of love for her orphan nephew; but when that last office of affection had been performed, she took the little one on her knees, and folded him to her breast, and gave him her heart, as she had given it long ago to his father; for this gentle unselfish creature was one who must needs have some shrine at which to offer her daily sacrifice of self. Already

she was beginning to think how the orphan was to be cared for and the widow also, for whose return she looked daily.

For the return of Susan Lenoble Cydalise waited at Rouen several days after the funeral. She had, happily, an old schoolfellow comfortably established in the city; and in the house of this old friend she found a home. No one but her mother and this friend, whom she could trust, knew of the business that had brought her from Beaubocage. In seven years the father had never uttered his only son's name; in all the seven years that name had never been spoken in his hearing.

When three weeks had gone by since the departure of Susan for England, all hope of her return was abandoned by Mademoiselle Lenoble and the neighbours who had known the absent woman.

"She had the stamp of death on her face when she went away," said the labourer's wife, "as surely as it was on him that she left. I told her she had no strength for the journey; but she would go: there was no moving her from that. She had rich friends *là-bas*, who might help her husband. It was for that she went. That thought seemed to give her a kind of fever, and the strength of fever."

"And there has come no letter—nothing?"

"Nothing, mademoiselle."

On this Cydalise determined to return to Beaubocage. She could not well leave the child longer on the hands of these friendly people, even by paying for his maintenance, which she insisted on doing, though they would fain have shared their humble *pot-à-feu* and coarse loaf with him unrecompensed. She determined on a desperate step. She would take her brother's orphan child back with her, and leave the rest to Providence—to the chance of some sudden awakening of natural affection in a heart that had long languished in a kind of torpor that was almost death.

The little fellow pined sadly for those dear familiar faces, those tender soothing voices, that had vanished so suddenly from his life. But the voice of his aunt was very sweet and tender, and had a tone that recalled the father who was gone. With this kind aunt he left Rouen in the lumbering old vehicle that plied daily betwixt that city and Vevinord.

"Thou canst call me Cydalise for a while, my little one," she said to him; for she did not wish the child to proclaim the relationship between them yet awhile.

Ah, what bitter tears the two women shed over the soft fair curls of that little head, when they had the boy all to themselves in the turret chamber at Beaubocage, on whose white walls the eyes of Cydalise had opened almost every morning of her pure eventless life!

"Why dost thou cry so, madame?" the child asked of his grandmother, as she held him in her arms, kissing and weeping over him; "and what have they done with my father—and mamma too? She went away one day, but she told me that she would come back, so quickly, ah, so quickly! and the days passed, and they shut papa in his room, and would not let me go to him; and mamma did not come, though I asked the Blessed Virgin to send her back to me."

"Dear child, thy father and mother are in a brighter place than this hard world, where they had so much sorrow," Madame Lenoble answered, gently.

"Yes, they were often sorry," murmured the boy thoughtfully. "It was because of money; but then, when there was no money, mamma cried and kissed me, and kissed papa, and the good papa kissed us both, and somehow it always ended in happiness."

François Lenoble was, happily, absent on this day of tribulation. The women took their fill of sorrow, but it was sorrow mingled with a strange bitter sweetness that was almost joy. The seigneur of Beaubocage had gone to dine, as he still often did, with his old friend Baron Frehlter; for the breach of faith which had caused a lifelong disunion of father and son had not divided the two proprietors. Nay, indeed the Baron had been generous enough to plead the cause of the castaway.

"A man cannot dispose at will of his affections, my friend," he urged; "and it was more generous in your son to break faith with my daughter before marriage than after."

Mademoiselle Frehlter had not broken her heart on account of her lover's falsehood. She had been sufficiently indignant on the occasion, and had been more impatient of her mother's pet priest and pet poodle during the brief period in which she wore the willow. She had recovered her good humour, however, on being wooed by a young subaltern in a cavalry regiment stationed at Vevinord, the offshoot of a grander house than that of Lenoble, and whose good looks and good lineage had ultimately prevailed with the Baron. That gentleman had by no means too good an opinion of the son-in-law thus forced upon him; but peace was the highest good (with unlimited tobacco) to which his Germanic soul aspired; and for the sake of peace in the present he was content to hazard his daughter's happiness in the future.

"*That* is very brilliant," he said of M. Paul de Nérague, the young lieutenant of light cavalry; "but it is not solid, like Gustave. Your son is honest, candid—a brave heart. It is for that I would have given him Madelon. But it is Providence which disposes of us, as our good father St. Velours tells us often; and one must be content. Young Nérague pleases my

daughter, and I must swallow him, though for me he smells too strong of the barracks: *ça flaire la caserne, mon ami.*"

That odour of the barracks which distinguished the sub-lieutenant Paul de Nérague became more odious after his marriage with the virtuous Madelon, when he was established—*niché*, as he himself called it—in very comfortable, though somewhat grusome, apartments at Côtenoir. His riotous deportment, his hospitable disposition (as displayed in the frequent entertainment of his brothers-in-arms at the expense of his father-in-law), his Don Juan-like demeanour in relation to the housemaids and kitchen-wenches of the château—innocent enough in the main, but on that account so much the more audacious—struck terror to the hearts of Madame Frehlter and her daughter; and the elder lady was much gratified by that thirst for foreign territory which carried the greater part of the French army and the regiment of the vivacious Paul to the distant wilds of Algeria.

The virtuous Madelon was too stolid to weep for her husband. But even her stolidity was not proof against the fiery influence of jealousy, and, waking and sleeping, her visions were of veiled damsels of Orient assailing the too inflammable heart of Lieutenant de Nérague.

The young officer was yet absent at that period in which Cydalise returned from Rouen with her brother's child.

The little boy was sleeping peacefully in a cot beside his aunt's bed (it had been his father's cot thirty years ago) when François Lenoble returned from Côtenoir that night.

It was not till the next day that he saw the child. He had been making his usual morning's round in the gardens and orchards, when he came into the salon, and saw the little boy seated near his grandmother's chair, playing with some dominoes. Something—perhaps the likeness to his dead son—the boy's black clothes, for Cydalise had contrived to dress him in decent mourning—struck suddenly on the old man's heart. "Who is that boy?" he asked, with a strange earnestness.

"Your son Gustave's only child," answered his wife gently,—"his orphan child."

François Lenoble looked at her, and from her to the boy; tried to speak, but could not; beckoned the child, and then dropped heavily into a chair and sobbed aloud. Until this moment no one had ever seen him shed a tear for the son he had put away from his home—and, as it had seemed, from his heart. Not by one sigh, not by one mournful utterance of the familiar name, had he betrayed the depth of that wound which he had endured, silently, obstinately, in all these years.

They suffered him to bemoan his dead son unhindered by stereotyped consolations. The two women stood by, and pitied him in silence. The little boy stared wonderingly, and at last

crept up to the sorrow-stricken father. "Why do you cry, poor old man?" he asked. "You have not lost your papa and mamma, as I have lost mine, have you? I want to stay with you and be your little boy, please. She told me to say that," he added, pointing to Cydalise.—"And I have said it right, haven't I?" he asked of the same lady.—"I think I shall love you, because you are like my papa, only older and uglier," the little one concluded, with angelic candour.

The seigneur of Beaubocage dried his tears with an effort. Beaubocage—Côtenoir. Ah, me! what empty sounds those two once magic names seemed to him now that his son's life had been sacrificed to so paltry an ambition, so sordid a passion, so vile and grovelling a desire! He took the boy on his knee, and kissed him tenderly. His thoughts bridged over a chasm of five-and-twenty years as his lips pressed that fair young brow; and it was his own son—the son whom he had disowned—whose soft hair was mingling itself now with the grey bristles on his rugged chin.

"My child," he murmured softly, "the fear is that I shall love thee too well, and be to thee as much too weakly indulgent as I was wickedly stern to thy father. Anything is easier to humanity than justice."

This was said to himself rather than to the boy.

"Tell me thy name, little one," he asked presently, after a few moments' pensive meditation.

"I have two names, monsieur."

"Thou must call me grandfather. And the two names?"

"François Gustave."

"I shall call thee Gustave."

"But papa always called me François, and mamma said it was the name of a cruel man; but papa said he loved the name——"

"Ah, no more, little one!" cried the lord of Beaubocage suddenly; "thou knowest not with what dagger-thrusts thou dost pierce this poor old heart."

CHAPTER III.

GUSTAVE THE SECOND.

The little Gustave grew and flourished. Such love was lavished on him as rarely falls to the lot of children, though the spring of many lives may be rich in love's pure white blossom. The existence of this child seemed all happiness. He brought hope, and a sense of atonement, and all sweet things, to the quiet family at Beaubocage; and as he grew from childhood to boyhood, from boyhood to manhood, it seemed to that household as if the first Gustave of their love had never been taken from them. That Orphic fable of Zagreus repeats itself in many

households. For the one bright creature lost another is given; and then comes a time when it is almost difficult to separate the image of the missing one from the dear substitute who so nearly fills his place.

François Lenoble and his wife enjoyed a green old age, and the affection of their grandson made the cup of life sweet for them to the very dregs. There are, happily, some natures which indulgence cannot injure; some luxuriant flowers which attain strength as well as beauty under the influence of these tropical heats of affection. Gustave the second possessed all the noble qualities of Gustave the first. Frank, generous, brave, constant, affectionate, light-hearted, he shone on the failing eyes of his kindred radiant as a young Apollo, brave as a mortal Hercules.

Those things which the ignorant heart has at some time so passionately desired are apt to be granted when the desire has grown somewhat cold and dead. Thus it was with the ambition of François Lenoble. He lived to see the lands of Côtenoir and Beaubocage united in the person of his grandson, who married Clarice, the only surviving child of M. and Madame de Nérague. Two sons and a daughter had been born at Côtenoir; but the sons withered and faded in early boyhood, and even the daughter, though considered a flourishing plant in that poor garden of weakling blossoms, was but a fragile creature.

The old people at Beaubocage survived the seigneur and châtelaine of Côtenoir by some years, and survived also the fiery lieutenant, who fell in Algeria without having attained his captaincy, or added any military renown to the good old name of De Nérague in his own magnificent person.

François saw his grandson established at Côtenoir before he died. He expired with his hand in that of Gustave, whom, in the half-consciousness of that last hour, he mistook for the son he had disowned.

"What door was that that shut?" he asked, in an eager whisper. "Who said I turned my son out of doors—my only son? It's false! I couldn't have done it! Hark! there's the door shutting again! It sounds like the door of a tomb."

After this he dozed a little, and woke with a smile on his face.

"I have been dreaming of thy father, Gustave," he said calmly. "I thought that I saw him with a light shining in his face, and that he kissed and forgave me."

This was the end. The faithful wife was not slow to follow her husband to the grave, and there was now only a placid maiden lady at Beaubocage, Mademoiselle Cydalise Lenoble, whom everyone within ten leagues of Vevinord knew and loved,—a lay abbess, a Sister of Mercy in all save the robes; a tender creature, who lived only to do good.

Ten years passed, and M. Lenoble of Côtenoir was a widower.

with two fair young daughters at a convent school on the outskirts of Vevinord, and a boisterous son at an academy in Rouen. Gustave had never followed any profession; the lands of Beaubocage secured him a competence, so prudently had the small estate been managed by the kindred who adored him. His marriage had given him fortune. He had no need of trade or profession. His life was laid out for him like a prim Dutch flower-garden. He was to live at Côtenoir, and look after his estate, and smoke his pipe, as Baron Frehlter had done, and be a good husband to his wife, a kind father to his children. This latter part of his duty came natural to M. Lenoble. It was not in him to be otherwise than kind to women and children. His invalid wife praised him as a model of marital perfection. It was Gustave who wheeled her sofa from one room to another, Gustave who prepared her medicines, Gustave whose careful hands adjusted curtains and *portières*. The poor woman lived and died believing herself the happiest of wives. She mistook kindness for love.

M. Lenoble bore his wife's demise with Christian calmness. He was sorry that the fragile creature should have been taken so early from the pleasant home that was hers by right, but of passionate grief, or dreary sense of irreparable loss, there was none in that manly heart. There were times when the widower reproached himself for this want of feeling; but in very truth Madame Lenoble, *jeune*, had lived and died a nonentity. Her departure left no empty place; even her children scarcely missed her. The father was all-in-all.

Gustave had married at twenty years of age. He was twenty-nine when his wife died. His eldest daughter, Clarice, eight; his second, Madelon, seven; the boy, a spoilt young dog of five, not yet despatched to the great school at Rouen.

But in '65 Mademoiselle Clarice was fifteen years of age, and a very charming performer on the pianoforte, as the good nuns at the Convent of the Sacred Heart, at Vevinord, told the father. Mademoiselle Madelon was looking forward to her fourteenth anniversary, and she, too, was a very pretty pianist, and altogether a young prodigy of learning and goodness, as the nuns told the master of Côtenoir. The demoiselles of Côtenoir stood high in the estimation of pupils and mistress; they were a kind of noblesse; and the simple-minded superioress spoke of these young persons with some pride when she described her establishment to a stranger. It was a very comfortable little colony, a small world enclosed by high walls. The good mothers who taught and cherished the children were for the greater part ladies of superior and even exalted station; and there was a gentleness, a tenderness, in their care for these young lambs not always to be insured by the payment of an annual stipend. It must be

confessed that the young lambs were apt to be troublesome, and required a good deal of watching. To the eye of the philosopher that convent school would have afforded scope for curious study; for it is singular to discover what exceptional vices the youthful mind can develop from its inner consciousness, in homes as pure as this. There were black sheep even in the convent of the Sacré Cœur, damsels marked with a sign that meant "dangerous."

Happily for Gustave Lenoble, his daughters were amongst the brightest and the purest of those girl-graduates. They gave him no trouble, except when they asked him for a home.

"It seems so dull and dreary at Côtenoir, papa," they said, "though you are always so kind. It doesn't seem like home. Beaubocage is more home-like. At Côtenoir, when you are out, there is no one to talk to; and we have no little parties, no excursions into the country, none of those pleasures which the other girls tell us they have during the holidays."

This was the gist of the lamentations of Mademoiselles Clarice and Madelon; and the father knew not how to supply the mysterious something which was wanting to make Côtenoir a pleasant home. The girls could complain of no restraint, or pine for no indulgence, since their father was always prompt to gratify every whim. But there was some element of happiness wanting, nevertheless; and M. Lenoble perceived that it was so. The life at Côtenoir was desultory, straggling; an existence of perpetual dawdling; a life of shreds and patches, half-formed resolutions, projects begun and broken off in the middle. The good genius, the household angel, order, was wanting in that mansion. There was waste, dirt, destruction of all kinds, in the rambling old château; old servants, too weak or too lazy to work; old tradesmen, presuming on old-established habits of imposition, unquestioned so long as to have become a right—for the feudal system of fine and forfeiture has only changed hands. The power still flourishes, only it is the villein who takes tithe of his lord.

The servants at Côtenoir had gone their own ways with but little interference since the death of Madame de Nérague, which occurred two years before that of her daughter, Clarice Lenoble. Poor invalid Clarice had been quite unable to superintend her household; and since her death Mademoiselle Cydalise had been too feeble of health to assume any authority in her nephew's establishment, even if the household of Côtenoir would have submitted to interference from Beaubocage, which in all likelihood they would not.

Thus it happened that things had taken their own course at the château, and the course had been somewhat erratic. There is nothing so costly as muddle, and Gustave Lenoble had of late begun to perceive that he had the maximum of expense with the

minimum of comfort. Meanwhile the kind old aunt at Beaubocage gave her nieces much valuable advice against the time when they should be old enough to assume the management of their father's house. The sweet unselfish lady of Beaubocage had indeed undergone hard experience in the acquirement of the domestic art. Heaven and her own memory alone recorded those scrapings and pinchings and nice calculations of morsels by which she had contrived to save a few pounds for her outcast brother. Such sordid economics show but poorly on earth; but it is probable that in the mass of documentary evidence which goes before the Great Judge, Mademoiselle Lenoble's account-book will be placed on the right side.

Book the Third.

THE HORATIAD.

CHAPTER I.

CHIEFLY RETROSPECTIVE.

Captain Paget went his way to Rouen in a placid but not an exulting mood, after parting with his young friend Valentine Hawkehurst at the London Bridge terminus of the Brighton line. He was setting out upon an adventure wild and impracticable as the quest of Jason and his Argonauts; and this gallant captain was a carpet-knight, sufficiently adventurous and audacious in the diplomatic crusades of society, but in nowise eager to hazard his life on tented field and in thick press of war. If the Fates had allowed the accomplished Horatio to choose his own destiny, he would have elected to live in the immediate neighbourhood of St. James's Street, from the first day to the last of the London season, and to dine artistically and discreetly at one of those older and more exclusive clubs dear and familiar to him from the bright years of his youth. He was by nature a *flâneur*, a gossip, a lover of expensive luxuries and frivolous pleasures. He was not only incapable of a high thought himself, but was an unbeliever in the possibility of high thoughts or noble principles in the world he lived in. He measured the universe by that narrow scrap of tape which was the span of his own littleness. To him Cæsar was an imperial brigand, Cicero a hypocritical agitator. To him all great warriors were greedy time-servers like John Churchill; all statesmen plausible placemen; all reformers self-seeking pretenders. Nor did Captain Paget wish that it should be otherwise. In his ideal republic,

unselfishness and earnestness would have rendered a man rather a nuisance than otherwise. With the vices of his fellow-men the diplomatic Horatio was fully competent to deal; but some of his most subtle combinations on the chess-board of life would have been checkmated by an unexpected encounter with intractable virtue.

The necessity of living was the paramount consideration to which this gentleman had given his mind from the time when he found himself a popular subaltern in a crack regiment, admired for his easy manners and good looks, respected by meaner men for his good blood, and rich in everything except that vulgar dross without which the life of West-end London is so hollow a delusion, so bitter a comedy of mean shifts and lying devices.

That freebooter of civilization, the man who lives by his wits, is subject to strange fluctuations from prosperity to adversity. He is the miner or gold-digger of civilized life; and as there are times when his pickaxe strikes suddenly on a rich lode, so there are dreary intervals in which his spade turns up nothing but valueless clay, and the end of each day's work leaves him with no better evidence of his wasted labour than the aching limbs which he drags at nightfall to his dismal shanty.

For some months Captain Paget had found Philip Sheldon a very useful acquaintance. The stockbroker had been the secret inaugurator of two or three joint-stock companies, though figuring to the outer world only as director; and in the getting-up of these companies Horatio had been a useful instrument, and had received liberal payment for his labours. Unhappily, so serene an occupation as promoting cannot go on for ever; or rather, cannot remain for ever in the same hands. The human mind is naturally imitative, and the plagiarisms of commerce are infinitely more audacious than the small larcenies of literature. The joint-stock company market became day by day more crowded. No sooner did Philip Sheldon float the Non-destructive Laundry Company, the admirable organization of which would offer a guarantee against the use of chloride of lime and other destructive agencies in the wash-tub, than a rival power launched a colourable imitation thereof, in the Union-is-Strength Domestic Lavatory Company, with a professor of chemistry specially retained as inspector of wash-tubs. Thus it was that, after the profitable ripening of three such schemes, Mr. Sheldon deemed it advisable to retire from the field, and await a fitter time for the further exercise of his commercial genius.

Captain Paget's relations with the stockbroker did not, however, terminate with the cessation of his labours as secretary, jack-of-all-trades, and promoter. Having found him, so far, clever, and to all appearance trustworthy—and this was an important point, for no man so much needs honourable service as a rogue

—Philip Sheldon determined upon confiding to Horatio the conduct of a more delicate business than anything purely commercial. After that discovery of the telegraphic message sent by his brother George to Valentine Hawkehurst, and the further discovery of the advertisement relating to the unclaimed wealth of the lately deceased John Haygarth, Mr. Sheldon lost no time in organizing his plans for his own aggrandizement at the expense of his brother.

"George refused to let me in for a share of chances when I showed myself willing to help him," thought Philip. "He may discover by and by that I have contrived to let myself into his secrets; and that he might have played a better game by consenting to a partnership."

A life devoted to his own interests, and a consistent habit of selfishness, had rendered Mr. Sheldon, of the Lawn, Bayswater, and Stags Court, City, very quick of apprehension in all matters connected, immediately or remotely, with the making of money. The broken sentences of the telegram betrayed by the blotting-pad told him a great deal. They told him that there was a certain Goodge, in the town of Ullerton, who possessed letters so valuable to George Sheldon, as to be bought by his agent Valentine Hawkehurst. Letters for which Sheldon was willing to give money must needs be of considerable importance, since money was a very scarce commodity with that hunter of unconscious heirs-at-law. Again, a transaction which required the use of so expensive a medium as the electric telegraph rather than the penny post, might be fairly supposed a transaction of some moment. The letters in question might relate to some other estate than that of John Haygarth, for it was quite possible that the schemer of Gray's Inn had other irons in the fire. But this was a question of no moment to Philip Sheldon.

If the letters—or the information contained therein—were likely to be useful to George, they might be useful to him. If George found it worth his while to employ an agent at Ullerton, why should not he (Philip) have his agent in the same town? The pecuniary risk, which might be a serious affair to George, was child's play for Philip, who had always plenty of money, or, at any rate, the command of money. The whole business of heir-at-law hunting seemed to the stockbroker a very vague and shadowy piece of work, as compared to the kind of speculation that was familiar to him; but he knew that men had made money in such a manner, and any business by which money could be made, was interesting to him. Beyond this, the notion of cutting the ground from under his brother's feet had a certain attraction for him. George's manner to him had been somewhat offensive to him on more than one occasion since—well, since Tom Halliday's death. Mr. Sheldon had borne that offensiveness

in mind, with the determination to "take it out of" his brother on the earliest opportunity.

It seemed as if the opportunity had arrived, and Philip was not one of those men who wait shivering on the shore when Fortune's tide is at the flood. Mr. Sheldon launched his bark upon the rising waters, and within two hours of his discovery in the telegraph-office was closeted with Horatio Paget in the little parlour in Omega Street, making arrangements for the Captain's journey to Ullerton.

That Horatio was the right man for the work he wanted done, Mr. Sheldon had been quick to perceive.

"He knows Hawkehurst, and will be able to reckon up any manœuvres of his better than a stranger; and is, I think, altogether as deep an old gentleman as one could hope to meet with, barring *the* traditional gentleman who did odd jobs for Dr. Faustus," the stockbroker said to himself, as his hansom sped along Park Lane on its way to Chelsea. The eagerness with which Captain Paget took up the idea of this business was very agreeable to his patron.

"This is an affair in which success hinges on time," said Mr. Sheldon; "so, if you mean to go in for the business, you must start for Ullerton by the two o'clock express. You'll have just time to throw your razors and a clean shirt into a carpet-bag while I talk to you. I've got a cab outside, and a good one, that will take you to Euston Square in half an hour."

The Captain showed himself prompt in action. His bedchamber was a small apartment at the back of the parlour, and here he packed his bag while conversing with his employer.

"If you get upon the ground in time, you may obtain a look at the letters before they are handed over to Hawkehurst, or you may outbid him for them," said Mr. Sheldon; "but remember, whatever you do must be so done as to keep Hawkehurst and George completely in the dark as to our proceedings. If once they find out we are on their track, our chances will be gone, for they have got the information and we haven't; and it's only by following close in their footsteps we can hope to do anything."

"That is understood," replied the Captain, stooping over his bag; "I shall keep myself as close as possible, you may depend upon it. And it shan't be my fault if Valentine sees me or hears of me. I shall want money, by the bye; for one can't stir a step in this sort of affair without ready cash."

"I am quite aware of that. I stopped at the West-end branch of the Unitas and cashed a cheque for forty pounds. You can do a good deal in the way of bribery for forty pounds, in such a place as Ullerton. What you have to do is to keep your eye on Hawkehurst, and follow up every channel of information that he opens for you. He has the clue to the labyrinth,

remember, the reel of cotton, or whatever it was, that the young woman gave that Roman fellow. All you have to do is to get hold of it, and follow your leader." continued Philip, with his watch in his hand. "This business of the letters will be sharp work, for the chances are against us here, as it's more than likely the papers will have changed hands before you can get to Ullerton. But if you can't buy the letters, you may buy the information contained in them, and that is the next best thing. Your first move will be to ferret out this man Goodge. Everybody knows everybody else in such a place as Ullerton, large and busy as the town is, and you won't find that difficult. When you see Goodge, you'll know how to deal with him. The mode and manner of your dealing I leave to yourself. You are a man of the world, and will know how to manipulate the gentleman, whoever he may be. And now lock your bag and cut downstairs as fast as you can. Time's up. Here's your money—three tens, two fives. Good day."

CHAPTER II.

EPISTOLARY.

From Horatio Paget to Philip Sheldon.

Royal Hotel, Ullerton, Oct. 7, 186—.

My dear Sir,—I arrived here last evening just in time to run against Hawkehurst on the platform, which was rather a provoking encounter at the outset. He went further north by the same train that brought me from London. This train only stops at three places after Ullerton—Slowport, Black Harbour, and Manchester; and I shall take pains to discover which of these towns was Hawkehurst's destination. There was one satisfaction in seeing his departure by this train, inasmuch as it assured me that I had the ground clear for my own operations.

I had no difficulty in discovering the whereabouts of Goodge —*the* Goodge we want—and at eight o'clock was comfortably seated in that gentleman's parlour, talking over the affair of the letters. Tolerably quick work, I think you will allow, my dear sir, for a man whose years have fallen into the sere and yellow leaf.

Mr. Goodge is a Methodist parson—a class of person I have always detested. I found him peculiarly amenable to monetary influence. I need scarcely tell you that I was careful to conceal my identity from this person. I made so bold as to borrow the cognomen of an old-established firm of solicitors in the Fields, and took a somewhat high tone throughout the interview. I informed Mr. Goodge that the young man who had called on him with reference to certain letters connected with the affairs

of the Haygarth family—and I perceived from Mr. Goodge's face that we were on the right track—was a person of disreputable character, engaged in an underhand transaction calculated to injure a respected client of our house. I saw that the words "house" and "our" were talismanic in their effect upon the Methodist parson. You see, my dear sir, there is no one can manage this sort of thing so well as a gentleman. It comes natural to him. Your vulgar diplomatist seldom knows how to begin, and never knows when to stop. Here I had this low-bred Methodist fellow impressed by the idea of my individual and collective importance after five minutes' conversation. "But this comes too near the praising of myself; therefore hear other things," as the bard observes.

A very little further conversation rendered Mr. Goodge malleable. I found that Hawkehurst had approached him in the character of your brother's articled clerk, but under his own proper name. This is one point gained, since it assures me that Valentine is not skulking here under a feigned name; and will enable me to shape my future inquiries about him accordingly. I also ascertained Hawkehurst's whereabouts when in Ullerton. He stays at a low commercial house called the Black Swan. It appears that the man Goodge possesses a packet of letters written by a certain Mrs. Rebecca Haygarth, wife of one Matthew Haygarth. In what relationship this Matthew may stand to the intestate is to be discovered. It is evident he is an important link in the chain, or your brother would not want the letters. I need not trouble you with our conversation in detail. In gross it amounted to this: Mr. Goodge had pledged himself to hand over Mrs. Haygarth's letters, forty or so in number, to Hawkehurst in consideration of twenty pounds. They would have been already in Hawkehurst's possession, if Mr. Goodge had not objected to part with them except for ready money. In consideration of a payment of twenty pounds from me, he was willing to let me read all the letters, and select any ten I pleased to take. This bargain was not arrived at without considerable discussion, but it certainly struck me as a good one.

I opened the packet of papers then and there, and sat up until six o'clock the next morning, reading Mrs. Haygarth's letters in Mr. Goodge's parlour. Very fatiguing occupation for a man of my years. Mr. Goodge's hospitality began and ended in a cup of coffee. Such coffee! and I remember the mocha I used to get at Arthur's thirty years ago,—a Promethean beverage, that illumined the dullest smoking-room bore with a flash of wit or a glimmer of wisdom.

I enclose the ten letters which I have selected. They appear to me to tell the history of Mrs. Haygarth and her husband pretty plainly; but there is evidently something mysterious

lurking behind the commonplace existence of the husband. That is a matter for future consideration. All I have to do in the present is to keep you as well informed as your brother. It may strike you that the letters I forward herewith, which are certainly the cream of the correspondence, and the notes I have made from the remaining letters, are scarcely worth the money paid for them. In reply to such an objection, I can only say that you get more for *your* money than your brother George will get for his.

The hotel at which I have taken up my quarters is but a few paces from the commoner establishment where Hawkehurst is stopping. He is to call on Goodge for the letters to-day; so his excursion will be of brief duration. I find that the name of Haygarth is not unknown in this town, as there are a family of Judsons, some of whom call themselves Haygarth Judson. I intend inviting my landlord—a very superior person for his station—to discuss a bottle of wine with me after my chop this evening, and hope to obtain some information from him. In the meantime I shall keep myself close. It is of vital consequence that I should remain unseen by Hawkehurst. I do not believe he saw me on the platform last night, though we were as close to each other as we well could be.

Let me know what you think of the letters, and believe me to be, my dear sir, very faithfully yours, H. N. C. Paget.

Philip Sheldon, Esq., &c. &c. &c.

Philip Sheldon to Horatio Paget.

Bayswater, Oct. 8, 186—.

Dear Paget,—The letters are mysterious, and I don't see my way to getting much good out of them, but heartily approve your management of matters, and give you *carte blanche* to proceed, according to your own lights.

Yours truly, P. S.

Horatio Paget to Philip Sheldon.

Royal Hotel, Oct. 9, 186—.

My dear Sir,—The cultivation of my landlord has been very profitable. The house is the oldest in the town, and the business has descended in a direct line from father to son since the time of George the Second. This man's grandfather entertained the officers of William Duke of Cumberland, honoured by his contemporaries with the soubriquet of Billy the Butcher, during the "forty-five." I had to listen to and applaud a good many stories about Billy the Butcher before I could lead my landlord round to the subject of the Haygarths. But he was not more prosy than many men I have met at dinner-parties in the days

when the highest circles in the land were open to your humble servant.

The Haygarth family, of which the intestate John Haygarth was the last male descendant, were for a long period inhabitants of this town, and obtained their wealth by trading as grocers and general dealers in a shop not three hundred yards from the room in which I write. The building is still standing, and a curious, old-fashioned-looking place it is. The last of the Haygarths who carried on business therein was one Jonathan, whose son Matthew was the father of that Reverend John Haygarth, lately deceased, intestate. You will thus perceive that the letters I sent you are of much importance, as they relate solely to this Matthew, father of our intestate.

My next inquiries related to the Judson family, who are, it appears, descended from the issue of a certain Ruth Haygarth's marriage with one Peter Judson. This Ruth Haygarth was the only sister of the Matthew alluded to in the letters, and therefore was aunt of the intestate. It would herefrom appear that in this Judson family we must naturally look for the rightful claimant to the fortune of the deceased John Haygarth.

Possessed of this conviction, I proceeded to interrogate my landlord very cautiously as to the status, &c. of the Judson family, and amongst other questions, asked him with a complete assumption of indifference, whether he had ever heard that the Judsons expected to inherit property from any branch of the Haygarth family.

This careless interrogatory produced information of, as I imagine, a very valuable character. A certain Theodore Judson, attorney of this town, calls himself heir-at-law to the Haygarth estates; but before he can establish his claim, this Theodore must produce evidence of the demise, without heirs, of one Peter Judson, eldest surviving grandson of Ruth Haygarth's eldest son, a scamp and ne'er-do-weel—if living, supposed to be somewhere in India, where he went, as supercargo to a merchant vessel about, the year '41—who stands prior to Theodore Judson in the succession. I conclude that the said Theodore, who, as a lawyer, is likely to do things *secundum artem*, is doing his *possible* to obtain the necessary evidence; but in the meantime he is at a dead lock, and the whole affair appears to be in a charming condition for speculative interference. I opine, therefore, that your brother really has hit upon a good thing this time; and my only wonder is, that instead of allowing his agent, Hawkehurst, to waste his time hunting up old letters of Matthew Haygarth's (to all appearance valueless as documentary evidence), he does not send Valentine to India to hunt for Peter Judson, who, is living, is the rightful heir to the intestate's fortune, and

who, as a reckless extravagant fellow, would be likely to make very liberal terms with any one who offered to procure him a large lump of money.

I confess that I am quite at a loss to understand why your brother George does not take this very obvious course, and why Valentine potters about in this neighbourhood, when a gold mine is waiting to be *exploité* on the other side.

I shall be very glad to have your views upon this subject, for at the present moment I am fain to acknowledge that I do not see my way to taking any further steps in this business, unless by commencing a search for the missing Peter.

I am, my dear Sir, very truly yours,

H. N. C. Paget.

Philip Sheldon to Horatio Paget.

Bayswater, Oct. 10, 186—.

Dear Paget,—When so old a stager as G. S. does not take the obvious course, the inference is that there is a better course to be taken—*not* obvious to the uninitiated.

You have done very well so far, but the information you have obtained from your landlord is only such information as any one else may obtain from the current gossip of Ullerton. You haven't yet got to the *dessous des cartes*. Remember what I told you in London. G. S. *has* the clue to this labyrinth; and what you have to do is to hold on to the coat-tails (in a figurative sense) of his agent, V. H.

Don't put your trust in prosy old landlords, but continue to set a watch upon that young man, and follow up his trail as you did in the matter of the letters.

If the Peter Judson who went to India three-and-twenty years ago were the right man to follow, G. S. would scarcely give twenty pounds for the letters of Mrs. Matthew Haygarth. It appears to me that G. must be looking for an heir on the Haygarth side of the house; and if so, rely upon it he has his reasons. Don't bewilder yourself by trying to theorize, but get to the bottom of G.'s theory.

Yours truly, P. S.

Horatio Paget to Philip Sheldon.

Royal Hotel, Oct. 12, 186—.

My dear Sir,—Considering the advice contained in your last very good, I lost no time in acting upon it. I need hardly tell you, that to employ the services of a hired spy, and to degrade myself in some sort to the level of a private inquirer, was somewhat revolting to a man, who, in the decadence of his fortunes, has ever striven to place some limit on the outrages which that hard taskmaster, poverty, may have from time to time compelled

him to inflict upon his self-respect. But in the furtherance of a cause which I conclude is in no manner dishonourable, since an unclaimed heritage must needs be a prize open to all, I submitted to this temporary degradation of my higher feelings, and I trust that when the time arrives for the settlement of any pecuniary consideration which I am to derive from these irksome and uncongenial labours, my wounded self-respect may not be omitted from the reckoning.

The above exordium may appear to you tedious, but it is only just to myself to remind you that you are not dealing with a vulgar hireling.

My first step, after duly meditating your suggestions, was to find a fitting watch for the movements of Hawkehurst. I opined that the best person to play the spy would be that class of man whose existence seems for the most part devoted to the lounging at street corners, the chewing of straw, and that desultory kind of industry known in the *patois* of this race as "fetching errands." This is the man, or boy, who starts up from the pavement (as through a trap-door in the flags) whenever one alights from or would enter any kind of vehicle. Unbidden, unrequired, and obnoxious, the creature arises, and opens a door, or lays some rag of his wretched attire on a muddy wheel, and then whines, piteous, for a copper.

Such a man, or such a boy, I felt convinced must exist among the hangers-on of the Royal Hotel; nor was I mistaken. On inquiring for a handy lad, capable of attending upon my needs at all hours in the day, and not a servant in the hotel, but a person who would be wholly at my own disposal, I was informed that the Boots had a younger brother who was skilled in the fetching of errands, and who would be happy to wait upon me for a very reasonable remuneration, or in the words of the waiter himself, would be ready to leave it—*i.e.* the remuneration—to my own generosity. I know that there are no people who expect so much as those who leave the assessment of their claims to your own generosity; but as I wanted good service, I was prepared to pay well.

The younger Boots made his appearance in due course—a sharp young fellow enough—and I forthwith made him my slave by the promise of five shillings a day for every day in which I should require his services. I then told him that it was my misfortune to own—with a strong inclination to disown—a reprobate nephew, now an inhabitant of that very town. This nephew, I had reason to believe, was going at a very rapid rate to the dogs; but my affectionate feelings would not allow him to consummate his own destruction without one last effort to reclaim him. I had therefore followed him to Ullerton, whither I believed him to be led by the worst possible motives; and

having done so, my next business was to keep myself informed of his whereabouts.

Seeing that the younger Boots accepted these statements with unquestioning faith, I went on to inquire whether he felt himself equal to the delicate duty of hanging about the yard of the Black Swan, and watching the doors of exit from that hotel, with a view to following my recreant nephew wherever he might go, even if considerably beyond the limits of Ullerton. I saw that the lad's intelligence was likely to be equal to this transaction, unless there should arise any difficult or complicated position by reason of the suspicion of Hawkehurst, or other mischance. "Do you think you can watch the gentleman without being observed?" I asked. "I'm pretty well sure I can, sir," answered the boy, who is of an enterprising, and indeed audacious, temper. "Very well," said I, "you will go to the Black Swan Inn. Hawkehurst is the name by which my nephew is known there, and it will be your duty to find him out." I gave the boy a minute account of Valentine's appearance, and other instructions with which I need not trouble you. I further furnished him with money, so that he might be able to follow Hawkehurst by rail, or any other mode of conveyance, if necessary; and then despatched him, with an order to come back to me when he had seen our man safely lodged in the Black Swan after his day's perambulations. "And if he shouldn't go out at all?" suggested the lad. "In that case you must stick to your post till nightfall, and pick up all the information you can about my unfortunate nephew from the hangers-on of the hotel," said I. "I suppose you know some one at the Black Swan?" The boy informed me, in his untutored language, that he knew "a'most all of 'em," and thereupon departed.

At nine o'clock at night he again appeared before me, big with the importance of his day's work. He had seen my nephew issue forth from the Black Swan within an hour of leaving my presence, and had followed him, first to Mr. William Judson's in Ferrygate, where he waited and hung about nearly an hour, keeping himself well out of view round the corner of Chalkin Street, a turning close to Mr. Judson's house. After leaving this gentleman's house, my renegade nephew had proceeded—carrying a letter in his hand, and walking as if in very good spirits (but that fellow Hawkehurst would walk to the gallows in good spirits)—to the Lancaster Road, where he was admitted into Lochiel Villa, a house belonging, as my Mercury ascertained from a passing baker's boy, to Miss Judson, sister of the William Judson of Ferrygate. You will perceive that this town appears to teem with the Judson family. My messenger, with praiseworthy art, contrived to engage in a game of tip-cat (what, I wonder, *is* a tip-cat?) with some vagrant boys disporting them-

selves in the roadway, within view of Miss Judson's house. Hence, after the lapse of more than an hour, Boots-Mercury beheld my recreant relative emerge, and from this point followed him—always with extreme caution—back to the Black Swan. Here he hung about the yard, favoured by his close acquaintance with the ostler, until eight o'clock in the evening, no event of the smallest importance occurring during all those hours. But at eight there arrived a young woman, with a packet from Miss Judson to Mr. Hawkehurst. The packet was small, and was sealed with red wax. This was all my Mercury could ascertain respecting it; but this was something.

I at once divined that this packet must needs contain letters. I asked myself whether those letters or papers had been sold to Hawkehurst, or only lent to him, and I immediately concluded that they could only have been lent. It was all very well for Goodge, the Methodist parson, to traffic in the epistles of Mrs. Matthew Haygarth, but it was to the last degree unlikely that a well-to-do maiden lady would part with family letters or papers for any pecuniary consideration whatever. "No," I said to myself, "the documents have been lent, and will have to be returned;" and thereupon I laid my plans for the next day's campaign, with a view to obtaining a peep at those letters, by fair means or foul. I told the boy to be at his post in the inn yard early the next morning, and if my nephew did not leave the inn, my agent was to ascertain what he was doing, and to bring me word thereof. "I'll tell you what it is, Boots," I said; "I have reason to believe that sadly disposed nephew of mine has some wicked intention with regard to Miss Judson, who is nearly related to a young lady with whom that unprincipled young man is, or pretends to be, in love; and I very much fear that he means to send her some letters, written by this foolish niece of hers to my more foolish nephew, and eminently calculated to wound the good lady's feelings. Now, in order to prevent this very shameful conduct on his part, I want to intercept any packet or letter which that mistaken youth may send to Miss Judson. Do you feel yourself capable of getting hold of such a packet, on consideration of a bonus of half-a-sovereign in addition to the five shillings per diem already agreed upon?"

This, in more direct and vulgar phraseology, was what I said to the boy; and the boy departed, after pledging himself to bring me any packet which Hawkehurst might despatch from the Swan Inn. The only fear was that Hawkehurst might carry the packet himself, and this contingency appeared unpleasantly probable.

Fortune favoured us. My reprobate nephew was too ill to go out. He intrusted Miss Judson's packet to his waiter, the waiter confided it to the Boots, the Boots resigned the responsi-

bility in favour of my boy Mercury, who kindly offered to save that functionary the trouble of a walk to the Lancaster Road.

At eleven A.M. the packet was in my hands. I have devoted the best part of to-day to the contents of this packet. They consist of letters written by Matthew Haygarth, and distinguished by a most abominable orthography; but I remember my own father's epistolary composition to have been somewhat deficient in this respect; nor is it singular that the humble citizen should have been a poor hand at spelling in an age when royal personages indulged in a phonetic style of orthography which would provoke the laughter of a modern charity-boy. That the pretender to the crown of England should murder the two languages in which he wrote seems a small thing; but that Frederick the Great, the most accomplished of princes, bosom-friend of Voltaire, and sworn patron of the *literati*, should not have been able to spell, is a matter for some astonishment. I could but remember this fact, as I perused the epistles of Matthew Haygarth.

I felt that these letters had in all probability been carefully numbered by the lady to whom they belong, and that to tamper with them to any serious extent might be dangerous. I have therefore only ventured to retain one insignificant scrawl as an example of Matthew Haygarth's caligraphy and signature. From the rest I have taken copious notes. It appears to me that these letters relate to some *liaison* of the gentleman's youth; though I am fain to confess myself surprised to discover that, even in a period notorious for looseness of morals, a man should enter into such details in a correspondence with his sister. *Autres temps, autres mœurs.* I have selected my extracts with great care, and hope that you may be able to make more use of them than I can at present imagine possible. I shall post this letter and enclosure with my own hands, though in order to do so I must pass the Black Swan. I shall despatch my messenger to Lochiel Villa, with Miss Judson's packet, under cover of the darkness.

In much haste, to catch the London mail,

Truly yours,
H. N. C. P.

From Philip Sheldon to Horatio Paget.

City, Oct. 12, 186—

Dear Paget,—Come back to town. You are only wasting money, time, and trouble.

Yours, P. S.

CHAPTER III.

TOO CLEVER FOR A CATSPAW.

CAPTAIN PAGET returned to town, mystified by that sudden summons from his patron, and eager to know what new aspect of affairs rendered his further presence in Ullerton useless or undesirable.

Horatio arrived in the great city half-a-dozen hours before his sometime protégé, and was comfortably installed when Valentine returned to those lodgings in Omega Street, Chelsea, which the two men occupied in common.

Captain Paget went into the City to see Philip Sheldon on the day of his return, but did not succeed in finding the stockbroker. The evening's post brought him a letter from Philip, appointing an interview at Bayswater, at three o'clock on the following day—the day after Valentine's return from Ullerton.

Punctual to the moment appointed by this letter, Captain Paget appeared at the Lawn on the following day. He was ushered into Mr. Sheldon's study, where he found that gentleman awaiting him, grave and meditative of mood, but friendly, and indeed cordial, in his manner to the returning traveller.

"My dear Paget, sit down; I am delighted to see you. Your trip has made you look five years younger, by Jove! I was sorry to find you had called while I was out, and had waited for me upwards of an hour yesterday. I have a good deal of worry on my shoulders just now; commerce is all worry, you know. The Marquis of Lambeth has come into the market and bought up two-thirds of the Astrakhan Grand Trunk debenture bonds, just as our house had speculated for the fall. And since it has got wind that the Marquis is sweet upon the concern, the bonds are going up like a skyrocket. Such is life. I thought we had better have our little talk here; it's quieter than in the City. Have some sherry and soda; you like that Manzanilla of mine, I know."

And the hospitable Philip rang the bell, without thinking it necessary to wait for his guest's answer.

There was a cordiality, a conciliating friendliness about the stockbroker's manner which Horatio Paget did not like.

"He's too civil by half," the Captain said to himself; "he means to do me."

"And now about this Ullerton business," Mr. Sheldon began, when the wine and soda-water had been brought, and a tall tumbler of that refreshing compound filled for the Captain; "you have really managed matters admirably. I cannot too much applaud your diplomatic tact. You would have put a what's-his-name—that fellow of Napoleon's—to the blush by your

management of the whole business. But, unfortunately, when it's all done it comes to nothing; the whole affair is evidently, from beginning to end, a mare's-nest. It is one of those wild geese which my brother George has been chasing for the last ten years, and which never have resulted in profit to him or anybody else; and I should be something worse than a fool if I were to lend myself any longer to such a folly."

"Humph," muttered the Captain, "here is a change indeed!"

"Well, yes," Mr. Sheldon answered coolly. "I dare say my conduct does seem rather capricious; but you see George put me out of temper the other day, and I was determined, if he had got a good thing, to cut the ground from under his feet. All your communications from Ullerton tend to show me that he has *not* got hold of a good thing, and that in any attempt to circumvent him I should only be circumventing myself, wasting your time, and my own money. This Judson family seems numberless; and it is evident to me that the Reverend John Haygarth's fortune will be a bone of contention amongst the Judsons in the High Court of Chancery for any indefinite number of years between this and the milennium. So I really think, my dear Paget, we'd better consider this transaction finished. I will give you whatever honorarium you think fit to name for your trouble, and we'll close the affair. I shall find plenty more business as good, or better, for you to do."

"You are very good," replied the Captain, in nowise satisfied by this promise. It was all too smooth, too conciliatory. And there was a suddenness in this change of plan that was altogether mysterious. So indeed might a capricious man be expected to drop a speculation he had been eager to inaugurate, but Philip Sheldon was the last of men to be suspected of caprice.

"You must have taken an immense deal of trouble with those extracts, now," said the stockbroker carelessly, as Horatio rose to depart, offended and angry, but anxious to conceal his anger. "What, are you off so soon? I thought you would stop and take a chop with us."

"No, thanks; I have an engagement elsewhere. Yes, I took an inordinate trouble with those extracts, and I am sorry to think they should be useless."

"Well, yes, it is rather provoking to you, I dare say. The extracts would be very interesting from a social point of view, no doubt, to people who care about such things; but in a legal sense they are waste-paper. I can't understand why Hawkehurst was in Ullerton; for, as you yourself suggested, that Peter Judson who went to India must be *the* Judson wanted for this case."

"Your brother may be in league with some other branch of

the Judson family. Or what if he is hunting for an heir on the Haygarth side?" asked the Captain, with a very close watch upon Mr. Sheldon's face. Let the stockbroker be never so skilful a navigator of the high seas of life, there was no undercurrent, no cross trade-wind, no unexplained veering of the magnetic needle to the west, in the mysterics whereof the Captain was not also versed. When Columbus wanted to keep his sailors quiet on that wondrous voyage over an unknown ocean to the Western world, the diplomatic admiral made so bold as to underrate the length of each day's sail in an unveracious log, which he kept for the inspection of his crew; but no doctoring of the social log-book could mislead the acute Horatio.

"How about the Haygarth side of the house?" he asked again; for it had seemed to him that at his first mention of the name of Haygarth Mr. Sheldon had winced, ever so little. This time, however, he betrayed not the faintest concern; but he was doubtless now on his guard.

"Well, I don't see how there can be any claimant on that side of the house," he said carelessly. "You see, according to your old landlord's statement—which I take to be correct—Jonathan Haygarth had but one son, a certain Matthew, who married one Rebecca So-and-so, and had, in his turn one only son, the intestate John. Now, in that case, where is your heir to come from, except through Matthew's sister Ruth, who married Peter Judson?"

"Isn't it just possible that Matthew Haygarth may have married twice, and had other children? Those letters certainly suggest the idea of a secret alliance of some kind on Haygarth's part, and the existence of a family, to whom he appears to have been warmly attached. My first idea of this affair was that it must have been a low *liaison;* but I could hardly realize the fact of Matthew's confiding in his sister under any such circumstances, however lax in his morals that gentleman may have been. Mrs. Matthew Haygarth's letters hint at some mystery in her husband's life. Is it not likely that this hidden family was a legitimate one?"

"I can't quite see my way to that idea," Mr. Sheldon answered, in a meditative tone. "It seems very unlikely that any marriage of Haygarth's could have remained unknown to his townsmen; and even if it were so, I doubt the possibility of our tracing the heirs from such a marriage. No, my dear Paget, I have resolved to wash my hands of the business, and leave my brother George in undisturbed possession of his ground."

"In that case, perhaps, you will return my notes; they are interesting to me."

Here again the faintest indication of annoyance in the stockbroker's face told its tale to Captain Paget. For your accomplished navigator of the unknown seas there is no ocean bird, no floating weed, that has not a language and a significance.

"You can have your notes, if you want them," answered Mr. Sheldon; "they are at my office. I'll hunt them up and send them to you; or you had better look in upon me in the City early next week, and I can give you a cheque at the same time."

"Thanks. I will be sure and do so."

"You say the orthography of the original letters was queer. I suppose your copies were faithful in all matters except the orthography. And in the names, you of course adhered to the original spelling?"

"Most decidedly," replied Captain Paget, opening the door to depart, and with a somewhat cynical smile upon his face, which was hidden from Mr. Sheldon.

"I suppose there is no doubt of your accuracy with regard to the name of Meynell, now?"

"Not the least. Good afternoon. Ah, there's our young friend Hawkehurst!" exclaimed the Captain, in his "society" voice, as he looked out into the hall, where Valentine was parting with Diana.

He came and greeted his young friend, and they left the house together.

This was the occasion upon which Valentine was startled by hearing the name "Meynell" pronounced by the lips of Philip Sheldon.

CHAPTER IV.

CAPTAIN PAGET IS PATERNAL.

Horatio Paget left the Lawn after the foregoing interview, fully convinced that Mr. Sheldon was only desirous to throw him off the scent, in order to follow up the chase alone, for his sole profit and advantage.

"My last letter conveyed some intelligence that altered his whole plan of action," thought the Captain; "that is perfectly clear. He was somewhat wanting in tact when he recalled me so suddenly. But I suppose he thought it would be easy to throw dust in my poor old eyes. What was the intelligence that made him change his mind? That is the grand question."

Captain Paget dined alone at a West-End restaurant that evening. He dined well, for he had in hand certain moneys advanced by his patron, and he was not disposed to be parsimonious. He sat for some time in meditative mood over his pint

bottle of Chambertin, and the subject of his meditation was Philip Sheldon.

"Yes," he murmured at last, "that is it. The charm is in the name of Meynell. Why else should he question me about the orthography of that name? I sent sent him information about Matthew Haygarth in the wife's letters, and he took no special notice of that information. It was only when the name of Meynell cropped up that he changed his tactics and tried to throw me over. It seems to me that he must have some knowledge of this Meynell branch, and therefore thinks himself strong enough to act alone, and to throw me over the bridge. To throw me over," the Captain repeated to himself slowly. "Well, we'll see about that. We'll see; yes, we'll see."

At noon on the following day Captain Paget presented himself again at the Bayswater villa, where his daughter ate the bread of dependence. He appeared this time in a purely paterna. character. He came to call upon his only child. Before paying this visit the Captain had improved the shining hour by a careful study of the current and two or three back volumes of the Post-Office and Trade Directories; but all his researches in those interesting volumes had failed to reveal to him the existence of any metropolitan Meynells.

"The Meynells whom Sheldon knows may be in the heart of the country," he said to himself, after these futile labours.

It was a fine autumnal morning, and as Miss Paget was at home and disengaged, her affectionate father suggested that she should take a walk with him in Kensington Gardens. Such a promenade had very little attraction for the young lady; but she had a vague idea that she owed a kind of duty to her father not remitted by his neglect of all duties to her; so she assented with a smile, and went out with him, looking very handsome and stylish in her simple but fashionable attire, no part of which had been provided by the parent she accompanied.

The Captain surveyed her with some sense of family pride.

"Upon my word, my dear, you do me credit!" he exclaimed, with a somewhat patronising kindness of tone and manner; "indeed any man might be proud of such a daughter. You are every inch a Paget."

"I hope not, papa," said the girl involuntarily; but the Captain's more delicate instincts had been considerably blunted in the press and jostle of life, and he did not feel the sting of this remark.

"Well, perhaps you are right, my love," he replied blandly; "the Pagets *are* an unlucky family. Like those Grecian people, the Atri—, what's-his-name—the man who was killed in his bath, you know. His wife, or the other young person who had come to visit his daughters, made the water too hot, you know

—and that kind of thing. I am not quite clear about the story, but it's one of those farragos of rubbish they make young men learn at public schools. Yes, my dear, I really am amazingly pleased by your improved appearance. Those Sheldon people dress you very nicely; and I consider your residence in that family a very agreeable arrangement for all parties. You confer a favour on the girl by your society, and so on, and the mother provides you with a comfortable home. All I wonder is that your good looks haven't made their mark before this with some of Sheldon's rich stockbroking fellows."

"We see very little of the stockbroking fellows, as you call them, at the Lawn, papa."

"Indeed! I thought Sheldon kept a great deal of company."

"O no. He gives a dinner now and then, a gentleman's dinner usually; and poor Mrs. Sheldon is very anxious that it should all go off well, as she says; but I don't think he is a person who cares much for society."

"Really, now?"

"His mind seems completely occupied by his business, you see, papa. That horrible pursuit of gain seems to require all his thoughts, and all his time. He is always reading commercial papers, the *Money Market* and *On Change*, and the *Stockbrokers' Vade Mecum*, and publications of that kind. When he is not reading he is thinking; and by his manner one would fancy his thoughts were always gloomy and unpleasant. What a miserable, hateful, unholy life to lead! I would not be that man for all the money in the Bank of England. But it is a kind of treachery to tell these things. Mr. Sheldon is very good to me. He lets me sit at his table and share the comforts of his home, and I must be very ungrateful to speak against him. I do *not* mean to speak against him, you see, papa—I only mean that a life devoted to money-making is in itself hateful."

"My dear child, you may be assured that anything you say to *me* will go no further," said the Captain, with dignity; "and in whom should you confide, if not in your father? I have a profound respect for Sheldon and his family—yes, my love, a profound respect; and I think that girl Sarah—no, I mean Charlotte—a very charming young person. I need scarcely tell you that the smallest details of your life in that family possess a keen interest for me. I am not without a father's feelings, Diana, though circumstances have never permitted me to perform a father's duties."

And here the solitary tear which the accomplished Horatio could produce at will trembled in his eye. This one tear was always at his command. For the life of him he could not have

produced a second; but the single drop never failed him, and he found one tear as effective as a dozen, in giving point and finish to a pathetic speech.

Diana looked at him, and wondered, and doubted. Alas, she knew him only too well! Any other creature in this wide world he might deceive, but not her. She had lived with him; she had tasted the bitterness of dependence upon him—ten times more bitter than dependence on strangers. She had shown him her threadbare garments day after day, and had pleaded for a little money, to be put off with a lying excuse. She could not forget this. She had forgiven him long ago, being of too generous a nature to brood upon past injuries. But she could not forget what manner of man he was, and thank him for pretty speeches which she knew to be meaningless.

They talked a little more of Mr. Sheldon and his family, but Diana did not again permit herself to be betrayed into any vehement expressions of her opinions. She answered all her father's questions without restraint, for they were very commonplace questions, of a kind that might be answered without any breach of faith.

"Amongst the Sheldons' acquaintances did you ever hear of any people called Meynell?" Captain Paget asked at length.

"Yes," Diana replied, after a moment's thought; "the name is certainly very familiar to me;" and then, after a pause, she exclaimed, "Why, the Meynells were relations of Charlotte's! Yes, her grandmother was a Miss Meynell; I perfectly remember hearing Mrs. Sheldon talk about the Meynells. But I do not think there are any descendants of that family now living. Why do you ask the question, papa? What interest have you in the Meynells?"

"Well, my dear, I have my reasons, but they in no manner concern Mr. Sheldon or his family; and I must beg you to be careful not to mention the subject in your conversation with those worthy people. I want to know all about this Meynell family. I have come across some people of that name, and I want to ascertain the precise relationship existing between these people and the Sheldons. But the Sheldons must know nothing of this inquiry for the present. The people I speak of are poor and proud, and they would perish rather than press a relationship upon a rich man, unless fully justified by the closeness of family ties. I am sure you understand all this, Diana?"

"Not very clearly, papa."

"Well, my dear, it is a delicate position, and perhaps somewhat difficult for the comprehension of a third party. All you need understand is the one fact, that any information respecting the Meynell family will be vitally interesting to my friends, and, through them, serviceable to me. There is, in fact, a legacy

which these friends of mine could claim, under a certain will, if once assured as to the degree of their relationship to your friend Charlotte's kindred on the Meynell side of the house. To give them the means of securing this legacy would be to help the ends of justice; and I am sure, Diana, you would wish to do that."

"Of course, papa, if I can do so without any breach of faith with my employers. Can you promise me that no harm will result to the Sheldons, above all to Charlotte Halliday, from any information I may procure for you respecting the Meynell family?"

"Certainly, Diana, I can promise you that. I repeat most solemnly, that by obtaining such information for me you will be aiding the cause of justice."

If Horatio Paget might ever be betrayed into the inconsistency of a truthful assertion, it seemed to his daughter that it was likely to be in this moment. His words sounded like truth; and, on reflection, Diana failed to perceive that she could by any possibility inflict wrong on her friends by obliging her father in this small affair.

"Let me think the matter over, papa," she said.

"Nonsense, Diana; what thinking over can be wanted about such a trifle? I never before asked you a favour. Surely you cannot refuse to grant so simple a request, after the trouble I have taken to explain my reasons for making it."

There was some further discussion, which ended in Miss Paget consenting to oblige her father.

"And you will manage matters with tact?" urged the Captain, at parting.

"There is no especial tact required, papa," replied Diana; "the matter is easy enough. Mrs. Sheldon is very fond of talking about her own affairs. I have only to ask her some leading question about the Meynells, and she will run on for an hour, telling me the minutest details of family history connected with them. I dare say I have heard the whole story before, and have not heeded it: I often find my thoughts wandering when Mrs. Sheldon is talking."

Three days after this Captain Paget called on Mr. Sheldon in the City, when he received a very handsome recompense for his labours at Ullerton, and became repossessed of the extracts he had made from Matthew Haygarth's letters, but not of the same Mr. Haygarth's autograph letter: that document Mr. Sheldon confessed to having mislaid.

"He has mislaid the original letter, and he has had ample leisure for copying my extracts; and he thinks I am such a consummate fool as not to see all that," thought Horatio, as he left the stockbroker's office, enriched but not satisfied.

In the course of the same day he received a long letter from Diana containing the whole history of the Meynells, as known to Mrs. Sheldon. Once set talking, Georgy had told all she could tell, delighted to find herself listened to with obvious interest by her companion.

"I trust that you have not deceived me, my dear father," Diana concluded, after setting forth the Meynell history. "The dear good soul was so candid and confiding, and seemed so pleased by the interest I showed in her family affairs, that I should feel myself the vilest of wretches if any harm could result to her, or those she loves, from the information thus obtained."

The information was very complete. Mrs. Sheldon had a kindly and amiable nature, but she was not one of those sensitive souls who instinctively shrink from a story of bitter shame or profound sorrow as from a cureless wound. She told Diana, with many lamentations, and much second-hand morality, the sad history of Susan Meynell's elopement, and of the return, fourteen years afterwards, of the weary wanderer. Even the poor little trunk, with the name of the Rouen trunk-maker, Mrs. Sheldon dwelt upon with graphic insistence. A certain womanly delicacy had prevented her ever telling this story in the presence of her brother-in-law, George Sheldon, whose hard worldly manner in no way invited any sentimental revelation. Thus it happened that George had never heard the name of Meynell in connection with his friend Tom Halliday's family, or had heard it so seldom as to have entirely forgotten it. To Horatio his daughter's letter was priceless. It placed him at once in as good a position as Philip Sheldon, or as George Sheldon and his coadjutor, Valentine Hawkehurst. There were thus three different interests involved in the inheritance of the Reverend John Haygarth.

Captain Paget sat late by a comfortable fire, in his own bedchamber, that night, enjoying an excellent cigar, and meditating the following jottings from a pedigree:—

CHARLOTTE MEYNELL, married JAMES HALLIDAY.

|

THOMAS HALLIDAY, only son of above, married GEORGINA, now MRS. SHELDON; had issue,

|

CHARLOTTE HALLIDAY.

SUSAN MEYNELL, only and elder sister of the above-named Charlotte, ran away from her home, in Yorkshire, with a Mr. Kingdon, brother to Lord Darnsville. Fate unknown during fourteen years of her life. Died in London, 1835. Buried under her maiden name; but no positive evidence to show that she was unmarried.

CHAPTER V.

THE CAPTAIN'S COADJUTOR.

Once in possession of the connection between the intestate John Haygarth and the Halliday family, Captain Paget's course was an easy one. He understood now why his investigations had been so suddenly brought to a standstill. Philip Sheldon had discovered the unexpected connection, and was eager to put a stop to researches that might lead to a like discovery on the part of his coadjutor.

"And Sheldon expects to prove his stepdaughter's claim to this fortune?" thought the Captain. "He will affect ignorance of the whole transaction until his plans are ripe, and then spring them suddenly upon his brother George. I wonder if there is anything to be made out of George by letting him into the secret of his brother's interference? No; I think not. George is as poor as a church mouse, and Philip must always be the more profitable acquaintance."

On the broad basis afforded by Diana's letter Captain Paget was able to build up the whole scheme of the Haygarthian succession. The pedigree of the Meynells was sufficiently simple, if their legitimate descent from Matthew Haygarth could be fairly proved. Charlotte Halliday was heiress-at-law to the fortune of John Haygarth, always provided that her great-aunt Susan died without legitimate issue.

Here was the one chance which appeared to the adventurous mind of Horatio Paget worth some trouble in the way of research. Fourteen years of Susan Meynell's life had been spent away from all who knew her. It was certainly possible that in that time she might have formed some legitimate alliance.

This was the problem which Horatio set himself to solve. Your adventurer is, of all manner of men, the most sanguine. Sir Walter Raleigh sees visions of gold and glory where grave statesman see only a fool's paradise of dreams and fancies. To the hopeful mind of the Captain these fourteen unrecorded years of Susan Meynell's life seemed a very Golconda.

He did not, however, rest satisfied with the information afforded by Diana's letter.

"I will have the story of these Meynells at first-hand as well as at second-hand," he said to himself; and he lost no time in presenting himself again at the Villa—this time as a visitor to Mrs. Sheldon.

With Georgy he had been always a favourite. His little stories of the great world—the Prince and Perdita, Brummel and Sheridan—though by no means novel to those acquainted with that glorious period of British history, were very agreeable

to Georgy. The Captain's florid flatteries pleased her; and she contrasted the ceremonious manners of that gentleman with the curt business-like style of her husband, very much to the Captain's advantage. He came to thank her for her goodness to his child, and this occasion gave him ample opportunity for sentiment. He had asked to see Mrs. Sheldon alone, as his daughter's presence would have been some hindrance to the carrying out of his design.

"There are things I have to say which I should scarcely care to utter before my daughter, you see, my dear Mrs. Sheldon," he said, with pathetic earnestness. "I should not wish to remind the dear child of her desolate position; and I need scarcly tell you that position is *very* desolate. A father who, at his best, cannot provide a fitting home for a delicately nurtured girl, and who at any moment may be snatched away, is but a poor protector. And were it not for your friendship, I know not what my child's fate might be. The dangers and temptations that beset a handsome young woman are very terrible, my dear Mrs. Sheldon."

This was intended to lead up to the subject of Susan Meynell, but Georgy did not rise to the bait. She only shook her head plaintively in assent to the Captain's proposition.

"Yes, madam; beauty, unallied with strength of mind and high principles, is apt to be a fatal dower. In every family there are sad histories," murmured the sentimental Horatio.

Even this remark did not produce the required result; so the Captain drew upon his invention for a specimen history from the annals of his own house, which was a colourable imitation of Susan Meynell's story.

"And what was the end of this lovely Belinda Paget's career, my dear Mrs. Sheldon?" he concluded. "The gentleman was a man of high rank, but a scoundrel and a dastard. Sophia's brother, a cornet in the First Life Guards, called him out, and there was a meeting on Wimbledon Common, in which Lavinia's seducer was mortally wounded. There was a trial, and the young captain of Hussars, Amelia's brother, was sentenced to transportation for life. I need scarcely tell you that the sentence was never carried out. The young man fell gloriously at Waterloo, at the head of his own regiment, the Scotch Fusiliers, and Lavinia—I beg pardon, Amelia; nay, what am I saying? the girl's name was Belinda—embraced the Roman Catholic faith, and expired from the effects of stigmata inflicted by her own hands in a paroxysm of remorse for her brother's untimely death at the hands of her seducer."

This lively little impromptu sketch had the desired effect. Melted by the woes of Belinda, or Sophia, or Amelia, or Lavinia Paget, Mrs. Sheldon was moved to relate a sad event in

her husband's family; and encouraged by the almost tearful sympathy of the Captain, she again repeated every detail of Susan Meynell's life, as known to her kindred. And as this recital had flowed spontaneously from the good soul's lips, she would be scarcely likely to allude to it afterwards in conversation with Mr. Sheldon; more especially as that gentleman was not in the habit of wasting much of his valuable time in small-talk with the members of his own household.

Captain Paget had duly calculated this, and every other hazard that menaced the intricate path he had mapped out for himself.

Satisfied by Mrs. Sheldon's repetition of Susan Meynell's story, and possessed of all the information he could hope to obtain from that quarter, Horatio set himself to consider what steps must next be taken. Much serious reflection convinced even his sanguine mind that the enterprise was a difficult one, and could scarcely be carried through successfully without help from some skilled genealogist.

"George Sheldon has given his lifetime to this sort of thing, and is a skilled lawyer to boot," Captain Paget said to himself. "If I hope to go in against him, I must have someone at my elbow as well versed in this sort of business as he is."

Having once admitted this necessity, the Captain set himself to consider where he was to find the right person. A very brief meditation settled this question. One among the numerous business transactions of Captain Paget's life had brought him in contact with a very respectable little French gentleman called Fleurus, who had begun his career as a notary, but, finding that profession unprofitable, had become a hunter of pedigrees and heirs-at-law—for the most part to insignificant legacies, unclaimed stock, and all other jetsam and flotsam thrown up on the shadowy shores of the Court of Chancery. M. Fleurus had not often been so fortunate as to put his industrious fingers into any large pie, but he had contrived to make a good deal of money out of small affairs, and had found his clients grateful.

"The man of men," thought Horatio Paget; and he betook himself to the office of M. Fleurus early next day, provided with all documents relating to the Haygarthian succession.

His interview with the little Frenchman was long and satisfactory. On certain conditions as to future reward, said reward to be contingent on success, M. Fleurus was ready to devote himself heart and soul to the interests of Captain Paget.

"To begin: we must find legal evidence of this Matthew Haygarth's marriage to the mother of this child C., who came afterwards to marry the man Meynell; and after we will go to Susan Meynell. Her box came from Rouen—that we know.

Where her box came from she is likely to have come from. So it is at Rouen, or near Rouen, we must look for her. Let me see: she die in 1835! that is long time. To look for the particulars of her life is like to dive into the ocean for to find the lost cargo of a ship that is gone down to the bottom, no one knows where. But to a man really expert in these things there is nothing of impossible. I will find you your Susan Meynell in less than six months; the evidence of her marriage; if she was married; her children, if she had children.

In less than six months—the margin seemed a wide one to the impatient Horatio. But he knew that such an investigation must needs be slow, and he left the matters in the hands of his new ally with a sense that he had done the best thing that could be done. Then followed for Horatio Paget two months of patient attendance upon fortune. He was not idle during this time; for Mr. Sheldon, who seemed particularly anxious to conciliate him, threw waifs and strays of business into his way. Before the middle of November M. Fleurus had found the register of Matthew Haygarth's marriage, as George Sheldon had found it before him, working in the same groove, and with the same order of intelligence. After this important step M. Fleurus departed for his native shores, where he had other business besides the Meynell affair to claim his attention. Meanwhile the astute Horatio kept a close eye upon his young friend Valentine. He knew from Diana that the young man had been in Yorkshire; and he guessed the motive of his visit to Newhall, not for a moment supposing that his presence in that farmhouse could have been accidental. The one turn of affairs that utterly and completely mystified him was Mr. Sheldon's sanction of the engagement between Valentine and Charlotte. This was a mystery for which he could for some time find no solution.

"Sheldon will try to establish his stepdaughter's claim to the fortune; that is clear. But why does he allow her to throw herself away on a penniless adventurer like Hawkehurst? If she were to marry him before recovering the Haygarth estate, she would recover it as his wife, and the fortune would be thrown unprotected into his hands."

More deliberate reflection cast a faint light upon Philip Sheldon's motives for so quixotic a course.

"The girl had fallen in love with Val. It was too late to prevent that. She is of age, and can marry whom she pleases. By showing himself opposed to her engagement with Val, he might have hurried her into rebellion, and an immediate marriage. By affecting to consent to the engagement, he would, on the contrary, gain time, and the advantage of all those chances that are involved in the lapse of time."

Within a few days of Christmas came the following letter from M. Fleurus:—

From Jacques Rousseau Fleurus to Horatio Paget.

Hotel de la Pucelle, place Jeanne d'Arc, Rouen,
21st December, 186—.

Monsieur,—After exertions incalculable, after labours herculean, I come to learn something of your Susanne Meynell,—more, I come to learn of her marriage. But I will begin at the beginning of things. The labours, the time, the efforts, the courage, the patience, the—I will say it without to blush—the genius which this enterprise has cost me, I will not enlarge upon. There are things which cannot tell themselves. To commence, I will tell you how I went to Rouen, how I advertised in the journals of Rouen, and asked among the people of Rouen—at shops, at hotels, by the help of my allies, the police, by means which you, in your inexperience of this science of research, could not even figure to yourself—always seeking the trace of this woman Meynell. It was all pain lost. Of this woman Meynell in Rouen there was no trace.

In the end I enraged myself. "Imbecile!" I said to myself, "why seek in this dull commercial city, among this heavy people, for that which thou shouldst seek only in the centre of all things? As the rivers go to the ocean, so flow all the streams of human life to the one great central ocean of humanity—Paris! It is there the Alpha and the Omega—there the mighty heart through which the blood of all the body must be pumped, and is pumping always," I say to myself, unconsciously rising to the sublimity of my great countryman, Hugo, in whose verse I find an echo of my own soul, and whose compositions I flatter myself I could have surpassed, if I had devoted to the Muses the time and the powers which I have squandered on a *vilain métier*, that demands the genius of a Talleyrand, and rewards with the crust of an artisan.

In Paris, then, I will seek the woman Meynell, and to Paris I go. In my place an inexperienced person would advertise in the most considerable papers; would invite Susanne Meynell to hear of something to her advantage; and would bring together a crowd of false Susanne Meynells, greedy to obtain the benefice. Me, I do nothing in this style there. On the contrary, in the most obscure little journals of Paris I publish a modest little advertisement as from the brother of Susanne Meynell, who implores his sister to visit him on his deathbed.

Here are follies, you will say. Since Susanne Meynell is dead it is thirty years, and her brother is dead also. Ah, how you are dull, you insulars, and how impossible for your foggy island

to produce a Fouché, a Canler, a genius of police, a Columbus of the subterranean darknesses of your city.

The brother, dying, advertises for the sister, dead; and who will answer that letter, think you? Some good Christian soul who has pity for the sick man, and who will not permit him to languish in waiting the sister who will come to him never. For us of the Roman Catholic religion the duty of charity is paramount. You of the Anglican faith—bah, how you are cold, how you are hard, how you are unpitiable!

My notice appears once, my notice appears twice, three times, four times, many times. I occupy myself about my other business, and I wait. I do not wait unusefully. In effect, a letter arrives at last at the address of the dying, from a lady who knew Susanne Meynell *before her marriage with M. Lenoble.*

Think you not that to me this was a moment of triumph? *Before her marriage with M. Lenoble!* Those words appear under my eyes in the writing of the unknown lady. "It is found!" I cry to myself; and then I hasten myself to reply to the unknown lady. Will she permit me to see her?

With all politeness I make the request; with all politeness it is answered. The lady calls herself Mademoiselle Servin. She resides in the street Grande-Mademoiselle, at the corner of the Place Lauzun. It is of all the streets of Paris the most miserable. One side is already removed. In face of the windows of those houses that still stand they are making a new Boulevard. Behind they are pulling down edifices of all kinds in the formation of a new square. At the side there is a yawning chasm between two tall houses, through which they pierce a new street. One sees the interior of many rooms rising one above another for seven stories. Here the gay hangings of an apartment of little master; there the still gaudier decoration of a boudoir of these ladies. High above these luxurious salons—ah, but how much more near to the skies!—one sees the poor grey paper, blackened and smoky, of a garret of sempstress, or workman, and the hearths black, deserted. These interiors thus exposed tighten me the heart. It is the autopsy of the domestic hearth.

I find the Mademoiselle Servin an old lady, grey and wan. The house where she now resides is the house which she has inhabited five-and-thirty years. They talk of pulling it down, and to her the idea of leaving it is exquisite pain. She is alone, a teacher of music. She has seen proprietors come and go. The *pension* has changed mistresses many times. Students of law and of medicine have come and passed like the shadows of a magic lantern; but this poor soul has remained still in her little room on the fourth, and has kept always her little old piano.

It was here she knew Susanne Meynell, and a young French-

man who became in love with her, for she was beautiful like the angels, this lady said to me.

Until we meet for all details. Enough that I come to discover where the marriage took place, that I come to obtain a copy of the register, and that I do all things in rule. Enough that the marriage is a good marriage—a regular marriage, and that I have placed myself already in communication with the heir of that marriage, who resides within some few leagues of this city.

My labours, my successes I will not describe. It must that they will be recompensed in the future. I have dispensed much money during these transactions.

Agree, monsieur, that I am your devoted servitor,

JACQUES ROUSSEAU FLEURUS.

It was in consequence of the receipt of this missive that the Captain trusted himself to the winds and waves in the cheerless December weather. He was well pleased to find that M. Fleurus had made discoveries so important; but he had no idea of letting that astute practitioner absorb all the power into his own hands.

"I must see Susan Meynell's heir," he said to himself; "I must give him clearly to understand that to me he owes the discovery of his claims, and that in this affair the Frenchman Fleurus is no more than a paid agent."

Book the Fourth.

GUSTAVE IN ENGLAND.

CHAPTER I.

HALCYON DAYS.

ONCE having offered up the fondest desires of her own heart on the shrine of duty, Diana Paget was not a person to repent herself of the pious sacrifice. After that Christmas night on which she had knelt at Charlotte's feet to confess her sad secret, and to resign all claim to the man she had loved so foolishly, so tenderly, with such a romantic and unselfish devotion, Miss Paget put away all thought of the past from her heart and mind. Heart and mind seemed empty and joyless without those loved tenants, though the tenants had been only fair

wraiths of dreams that were dead. There was a sense of something missing in her life—a blank, dull calm, which was at first very painful. But for Charlotte's sake she was careful to hide all outward token of despondency, and the foolish grief, put down by so strong a hand, was ere long well-nigh stifled.

Those dark days which succeeded Christmas were a period of halcyon peace for Valentine and Charlotte. The accepted lover came to the villa when he pleased, but was still careful not to encroach on the license allowed him. Once a week he permitted himself the delight of five-o'clock tea in Mrs. Sheldon's drawing-room, on which occasions he brought Charlotte all the news of his small literary world, and a good deal of useful information out of the books he had been reading. When Mr. Sheldon pleased to invite him to dinner on Sunday he gladly accepted the invitation, and this Sunday dinner became in due course an established institution.

"You may as well make this your home on a Sunday," said Mr. Sheldon one day, with careless cordiality; "I dare say you find Sunday dull in your lodgings."

"Yes, papa," cried Charlotte, "he does find it very dull—dreadfully dull—don't you, Valentine?"

And she regarded him with that pretty, tender, almost motherly look, which young ladies who are engaged are apt to bestow on their affianced lovers.

Miss Halliday was very grateful to her stepfather for his kindness to her landless adorer, and showed her appreciation of his conduct in many pretty little caressing ways, which would have been infinitely bewitching to a person of sentiment.

Unfortunately Mr. Sheldon was not sentimental, and any exhibition of feeling appeared to have an irritating effect upon his nerves. There were times when he shrank from some little sudden caress of Charlotte's as from the sting of an adder. Aversion, surprise, fear—what was it that showed in the expression of his face at these moments? Whatever that strange look was, it departed too quickly for analysis; and the stockbroker thanked his stepdaughter for her little affectionate demonstration with his wonted smile—the smile he smiled on Change, the smile which was sometimes on his lips when his mind was a nest of scorpions.

To Valentine, in these rosy hours, life seemed full of hope and brightness. He transferred his goods and chattels from Omega Street, Chelsea, to the pleasant lodging in the Edgware Road, where he was nearer Charlotte, and out of the way of his late patron Captain Paget, in the event of that gentleman's return from the Continent.

Fortune favoured him. The gaiety of heart which came with his happiness lent a grace to his pen. Pleasant thoughts and

fancies bedecked his pages. He saw everything in the rosy light of love and beauty, and there was a buoyant freshness in all he wrote. The Pegasus might be but a common hackney, but the hack was young and fresh, and galloped gaily as he scented the dewy morning air. It is not every poet whose Pegasus clears at a bound a space as wide as all that waste of land and sea the watchman views from his tall tower on the rock.

Mr. Hawkehurst's papers on Lauzun, Brummel, Sardanapalus, Rabelais, Lord Chesterfield, Erasmus, Beau Nash, Apelles, Galileo, and Philip of Orleans, were in demand, and the reading public wondered at this prodigy of book-making. He had begun to save money, and had opened a deposit account at the Unitas Bank. How he gloated over the deposit receipts in the stillness of the night, when he added a fresh one to his store! When he had three, for sums amounting in all to forty pounds, he took them to Charlotte, and she looked at them, and he looked at them, as if the poor little bits of printed paper had been specimens of virgin ore from some gold mine newly discovered by Mr. Hawkehurst. And then these foolish lovers kissed each other, as William Lee and his wife may have embraced after the penniless young student had perfected his invention of the stocking-frame.

"Forty pounds!" exclaimed Miss Halliday, "all won by your pen, and your poor fingers, and your poor, poor head! How it must ache after a long day's work! How clever you must be, Valentine!"

"Yes, dear; amazingly clever. Clever enough to know that you are the dearest girl in Christendom."

"Don't talk nonsense, sir! You are not clever enough to have the privilege of doing that yet awhile. I mean, how learned you must be to know such lots of things, all about Erasmus, and Galileo, and——"

"No, my darling, not Erasmus and Galileo. I knew all about Erasmus last week; but I am working at my paper on Galileo now, an exhaustive review of all the books that were ever written on the subject, in ten pages. I don't ask other people to remember what I write, you know, my dear, and I don't pledge myself to remember it. That sort of thing won't keep. There is a kind of sediment, no doubt, in one's note-book; but the effervescence of that vintage goes off rather quickly."

"I only know that you are a very clever person, and that one obtains an immensity of information from your writings," said Charlotte.

"Yes, dearest, there is a kind of wine that must be made into negus for such pretty little topers as you—the 'Wine of Cyprus,' as Mrs. Browning called it. It is better for pretty

girls to have the negus than to have nothing, or only weak home-brewed stuff that results in head-ache. My dearest, Fate has been very good to me, and I love my profession of letters. I am sure that of all educational processes there is none better than book-making; and the man who begins by making books must be a dolt, dunce, and dunderhead, if he do not end by writing them. So you may yet hope to see the morning that shall make your Valentine famous—for a fortnight. What man can hope to be famous for *more* than a fortnight in such a railroad age as this?"

During this halcyon period, in which Mr. Hawkehurst cultivated alternately the society of the Muses and his mistress, he saw little or nothing of George Sheldon. He had washed his hands of all share in the work of establishing Charlotte Halliday's claim to the Reverend John Haygarth's thousands. Indeed, since that interview in which Philip Sheldon had made so light of his stepdaughter's chances, and ratified his consent to her marriage with so humble a literary adventurer as himself, Mr. Hawkehurst had come to consider the Haygarthian inheritance as altogether a visionary business. If it were certain, or even probable, that Charlotte was to inherit a hundred thousand pounds, was it likely that Mr. Sheldon would encourage such an alliance? This question Mr. Hawkehurst always answered in the negative; and as days and weeks went by, and he heard no more of the Haygarth fortune, the idea of Charlotte's wealth became more and more shadowy.

If there were anything doing in this matter, the two brothers were now working together, and George had no further need of Valentine's help.

The two brothers were not working entirely together. Philip Sheldon had taken the matter into his own strong hand, and George found it very difficult to hold an inch of ground against that formidable antagonist. The papers and information which George had boasted of to Valentine, and the possession whereof was, as he asserted, the very keystone of the arch, proved to be of such small account that he ultimately consented to hand them over to his brother on the payment of expenses out of pocket, and a bonus of one hundred and fifty pounds, together with a written undertaking from Miss Halliday to pay him the fifth share of any fortune recovered by means of those papers.

This undertaking had been executed in the easiest manner.

"My brother has taken it into his wise head that there is some unclaimed stock standing in your grandfather's name which you are entitled to, Lotta," Mr. Sheldon said one morning; "and he wants to recover the amount for you, on condition of receiving a clear fifth when the sum is recovered. Have you any objection to sign such an undertaking?"

"Dear papa, how can I object?" cried Charlotte gaily. "Why, stocks are money, are they not? How fortunate we are, and how rich we are getting!"

"We!"

"Valentine and I," murmured the girl, blushing. "I cannot help thinking of him when any windfall of good fortune comes to me. What do you think, papa? He has saved forty pounds in little more than three months—all earned by his pen!"

> "Behold
> The arch-enchanter's wand! Itself a nothing;
> But taking sorcery from the master-hand
> To paralyze the Cæsars, and to strike
> The loud earth breathless!"

And Miss Halliday spouted the glowing lines of the noble dramatist with charming enthusiasm. She signed the required undertaking without looking at it, and it was duly witnessed by her stepfather.

"In your talk with your mother and Valentine, I should advise you to be as silent about this small business as about your own little fortune," Mr. Sheldon remarked presently.

"Mustn't I tell Valentine?" cried Charlotte, making a wry face; "I should so like to tell him—just about these stocks. I daresay *he* knows what stocks are; and it would be such cheering news for him, after he has worked his poor brain so for that forty pounds. I don't so much care about telling poor mamma; for she does exclaim and wonder so about things, that it is quite fatiguing to hear her. But please let me tell Valentine?"

Miss Halliday pursed-up her lips and offered her stepfather one of those kisses which she had of late been prompted to bestow on him out of the gratitude of a heart overflowing with girlish joy. He took the kiss as he might have taken a dose of medicine, but did not grant the request preferred by it.

"If you want to be a fool, you can tell your lover of this windfall; but if you wish to prove yourself a sensible girl, you will hold your tongue. He has saved forty pounds by hard work in the last three months, you say: do you think he would have saved forty pence if he had known that you had five thousand pounds at his disposal? I know that class of men; look at Goldsmith, the man who wrote the "Vicar of Wakefield,' and "Rasselas," and "Clarissa Harlowe," and so on. I have read somewhere that he never wrote except under coercion—that is to say, want of money."

Charlotte acknowledged the wisdom of this argument, and submitted. She was not what was called a strong-minded woman; and, indeed, strength of mind is not a plant indigenous

to the female nature, but an exceptional growth developed by exceptional circumstances. In Charlotte's life there had been nothing exceptional, and she was in all things soft and womanly, ready to acknowledge, and to be guided by, the wisdom of her seniors. So Valentine heard nothing of the undertaking executed by his lady-love.

After this, Mr. Sheldon took counsel's opinion, and set to work in real earnest to recover the estate of the deceased John Haygarth from the yawning jaws of that tame but all-devouring monster, the Crown. The work was slow, and the dryasdust details thereof need not be recorded here. It had but just begun when Horatio Paget suddenly returned from his Continental expedition, and established himself once more in the Omega Street lodgings.

CHAPTER II.

CAPTAIN PAGET AWAKENS TO A SENSE OF HIS DUTY.

CAPTAIN PAGET'S return was made known to the Sheldon circle by a letter from the returning wanderer to his daughter. The Captain was laid up with rheumatic gout, and wrote quite piteously to implore a visit from Diana. Miss Paget, always constant to the idea of a duty to be performed on her side, even to this *père prodigue*, obeyed the summons promptly, with the full approval of Georgy, always good-natured after her own fussy manner.

"And if you'd like to take your papa a bottle of Mr. Sheldon's old port, Diana, remember it's at your disposal. I'm sure I've heard people say that old port is good for the gout—or perhaps, by the bye, what I heard was that it *wasn't* good. I know old port and gout seem to run together in my head somehow. But if there's anything in the house your papa would like, Diana—wine, or gunpowder tea, or the eider-down coverlet off the spare bed, or the parlour crôquet, to amuse him of an evening, or a new novel—surely one couldn't forfeit one's subscription by lending a book to a non-subscribing invalid?"

While Georgy was suggesting the loan of almost every portable object in the house as a specific for Captain Paget's gout, Charlotte sent for a cab and made things smooth for her friend's departure. She wrapped her warmly against the February blast, and insisted upon going out to see her seated in the cab, whereby she offered to the pedestrians of that neighbourhood a seraphic vision of loveliness with tumbled hair. Charlotte had been always delightful, but Charlotte engaged to Valentine Hawkehurst was a creature of supernal sweetness and brightness—a radiant ministering angel, hovering lightly above a world too common for her foot to rest upon.

Miss Paget found her father suffering from a by no means severe attack of a respectable family gout, a little peevish from the effects of this affliction, but not at all depressed in mind. He had, indeed, the manner of a man with whom things are going pleasantly. There was a satisfaction in his tone, a placidity in his face, except when distorted for the moment by a twinge of pain, that were new to Diana, who had not been accustomed to behold the brighter side of her father's disposition. He seemed grateful for his daughter's visit, and received her with unwonted kindness of manner.

"You have come very promptly, my dear, and I am gratified by your early compliance with my request," he said with dignified affection, after he had given his daughter the kiss of greeting. "I was a great sufferer last night, Diana, a great sufferer, a prisoner to this chair, and the woman below attempted to send me up a dinner—*such* a dinner! One would think a very small degree of education necessary for the stewing of a kidney, but the things that woman gave me last night were like morsels of stewed leather. I am not an epicure, Diana; but with such a constitution as mine, good cooking is a vital necessity. Life in lodgings for a man of my age is a sore trial, my dear. I wish you were well married, Diana, and could give your father a humble corner at your fireside."

Diana smiled. It was a somewhat bitter smile; and there was scorn of herself, as well as scorn of her father in that bitterness.

"I am not the sort of person to marry well, papa," she said.

"Who knows? You are handsomer than nine-tenths of the women who marry well."

"No, papa; that is your sanguine manner of looking at your own property. And even if I were married to some one to whom I might give obedience and duty, and all that kind of thing, in exchange for a comfortable home, as they say in the advertisements, would you be content with a peaceful corner by my fireside? Do you think you would never pine for clubs and gaming-tables—nay, even for creditors to—to diplomatize with, and difficulties to surmount?"

"No, my dear. I am an old man; the clubs and gaming-houses have done with me, and I with them. I went to see a man at Arthur's a few months ago. I had written to him on a little matter of business—in fact, to be candid with you, my love, for the loan of a five-pound note—and I called at the club for his reply. I caught sight of my face in a distant glass as I was waiting in the strangers' room, and I thought I was looking at a ghost. There comes a time towards the close of a long troublesome life in which a man begins to feel like a ghost. His friends are gone, and his money is gone, his health is gone, his

good looks are gone; and the only mistake seems to be that the man himself should be left behind. I remember an observation of Lord Chesterfield's: 'Lord * * * * and I have been dead for the last two years, but we don't tell any one so,' he said; and there are few old men who couldn't say the same. But I am not down-hearted to-day, my dear. No, the habit of hoping has never quite deserted me; and it is only now and then that I take a dismal view of life. Come, my love, lay aside your bonnet and things. Dear me! what a handsome black silk dress, and how well you look in it!"

"It is a present from Charlotte, papa. She has a very liberal allowance of pocket-money, and is generosity itself. I don't like to take so much from her, but I only wound her by a refusal."

"Of course, my dear. There is nothing so ungracious as a refusal, and no mark of high breeding so rare as the art of gracious acceptance. Any booby can give a present; but to receive a gift without churlish reticence or florid rapture is no easy accomplishment. I am always pleased to see you well-dressed, my love"—Diana winced as she remembered her shabby hat and threadbare gown at Fôretdechêne—"and I am especially pleased to see you elegantly attired this evening, as I expect a gentleman by-and-by."

"A gentleman, papa!" exclaimed Miss Paget, with considerable surprise; "I thought that you had sent for me because you were ill and depressed and lonely."

"Well, yes, Diana. I certainly am ill; and I suppose it is scarcely unnatural that a father should wish to see his only daughter."

Diana was silent. A father's wish to see his daughter was indeed natural and common; but that Captain Paget, who in no period of his daughter's life had evinced for her the common affection of paternity, should be seized all of a sudden with a yearning for her society, was somewhat singular. But Diana's nature had been ennobled and fortified by the mental struggle and the impalpable sacrifice of the last few months, and she was in nowise disposed to repel any affectionate feeling of her father's even at this eleventh hour.

"*He* tells us the eleventh hour is not too late," she thought. "If it is not too late in the sight of that Divine Judge, shall it be thought too late by an erring creature like me?"

After a few minutes of thoughtful silence, she knelt down by her father's chair and kissed him.

"My dear father," she murmured softly, "believe me, I am very pleased to think you should wish to see me. I will come to you whenever you like to send for me. I am glad not to be a burden to you; but I should wish to be a comfort when I can."

The Captain shed his stock tear. It signified something nearer akin to real emotion than usual.

"My dear girl," he said, "this is very pleasing, very pleasing indeed. The day may come—I cannot just now say when—and events may arise—which—the nature of which I am not yet in a position to indicate to you—but the barren fig-tree may not be always fruitless. In its old age the withered trunk may put forth fresh branches. We will say no more of this, my love; and I will only remark that you may not go unrequited for any affection bestowed on your poor old father."

Diana smiled, and this time it was a pensive rather than a bitter smile. She had often heard her father talk like this before. She had often heard these oracular hints of some grand event looming mighty in the immediate future; but she had never seen the vague prophecy accomplished. Always a schemer, and always alternating between the boastful confidence of hope and the peevish bewailings of despair, the Captain had built his castle to-day to sit among its ruins to-morrow, ever since she had known him.

So she set little value on his hopeful talk of this evening, but was content to see him in good spirits. He contemplated her admiringly as she knelt by his easy-chair, and smoothed the shining coils of her dark hair with a gentle hand, as he looked downward at the thoughtful face—proud and grave, but not ungentle.

"You are a very handsome girl, Diana," he murmured, as much to himself as to his daughter; "yes, very handsome. Egad, I had no idea how handsome!"

"What has put such a fancy into your head to-night, papa?" asked Diana, laughing. "I do not believe in the good looks you are so kind as to attribute to me. When I see my face in the glass I perceive a pale gloomy countenance that is by no means pleasing."

"You may be out of spirits when you look in the glass. I hope you are not unhappy at Bayswater."

"Why should I be unhappy, papa? No sister was ever kinder or more loving than Charlotte Halliday is to me. I should be very ungrateful to Providence as well as to her if I did not appreciate such affection. How many lonely girls, like me, go through life without picking up a sister?"

"Yes, you are right, my dear. Those Sheldon people have been very useful to you. They are not the kind of people I should have wished a daughter of mine to be *liée* with, if I were in the position my birth entitles me to occupy; but as I am not in that position, I submit. That black silk becomes you admirably. And now, my love, be so kind as to ring the bell for lights and tea."

They had been sitting in the firelight—the mystic magical capricious firelight—which made even that tawdry lodging-house parlour seem a pleasant chamber. The tea-tray was brought, and candles. Diana seated herself at the table, and made tea with the contents of a little mahogany caddy.

"Don't pour out the tea just yet," said the Captain; "I expect a gentleman. I don't suppose he'll take tea, but it will look more civil to wait for him."

"And who is this mysterious gentleman, papa?"

"A Frenchman; a man I met while I was abroad."

"*Really* a gentleman?"

"Certainly, Diana," replied her father, with offended dignity. "Do you think I should admit any person to my friendship who is not a gentleman? My business relations I am powerless to govern; but friendship is a different matter. There is no man more exclusive than Horatio Paget. M. Lenoble is a gentleman of ancient lineage and amiable character."

"And rich, I suppose, papa?" asked Diana. She thought that her father would scarcely speak of the gentleman in a tone so profoundly respectful if he were not rich.

"Yes, Diana. M. Lenoble is master of a very fair estate, and is likely to be much richer before he dies."

"And he has been kind to you, papa?"

"Yes, he has shown me hospitality during my residence in Normandy. You need not speak of him to your friends the Sheldons."

"Not even to Charlotte?"

"Not even to Charlotte. I do not care to have my affairs discussed by that class of people."

"But, dear papa, why make a mystery about so unimportant a matter.

"I do not make a mystery; but I hate gossip. Mrs. Sheldon is an incorrigible gossip, and I daresay her daughter is no better."

"Charlotte is an angel, papa."

"That is very possible, But I beg that you will refrain from discussing my friend M. Lenoble in her angelic presence."

"As you please, papa," said Diana gravely. She felt herself bound to obey her father in this small matter; but the idea of this mystery and secrecy was very unwelcome to her. It implied that her father's acquaintance with this Frenchman was only a part of some new scheme. It was no honest friendship, which the Captain might be proud to own, glad to show the world that in these days of decadence he could still point to a friend. It was only some business alliance, underhand and stealthy; a social conspiracy, that must needs be conducted in darkness.

"Why did papa summon me here if he wants his acquaint-

ance with this man kept secret?" she asked herself; and the question seemed unanswerable.

She pictured this M. Lenoble to herself—a wizened, sallow-faced Macchiavellian individual, whose business in England must needs be connected with conspiracy, treason, commercial fraud, anything or everything stealthy and criminal.

"I wish you would let me go back to Bayswater before this gentleman comes, papa," she said presently. "I heard it strike seven just now, and I know I shall be expected early. I can come again whenever you like."

"No, no, my love; you must stop to see my friend. And now tell me a little about the Sheldons. Has anything been stirring since I saw them last?"

"Nothing whatever, papa. Charlotte is very happy; she always had a happy disposition, but she is gayer than ever since her engagement with—Valentine."

"What an absurd infatuation!" muttered the Captain.

"And he—Valentine—is very good, and works very hard at his literary profession—and loves her very dearly."

It cost her an effort to say this even now, even now when she fancied herself cured of that folly which had once been so sweet to her. To speak of him like this—to put him away out of her own life, and contemplate him as an element in the life of another—could not be done without some touch of the old anguish.

There was a loud double-knock at the street-door as she said this, and a step sounded presently in the passage; a quick, firm tread. There was nothing stealthy about that, at any rate.

"My friend Lenoble," said the Captain; and in the next instant a gentleman entered the room, a gentleman who was in every quality the opposite of the person whom Diana had expected to see.

These speculative pictures are seldom good portraits. Miss Paget had expected to find her father's ally small and shrivelled, old and ugly, dried-up and withered in the fiery atmosphere of fraud and conspiracy; in outward semblance a monkey, in soul a tiger. And instead of this obnoxious creature there burst into the room a man of four-and-thirty years of age, tall, stalwart, with a fair frank face, somewhat browned by summer suns; thick auburn hair and beard, close trimmed and cropped in the approved Gallic fashion—clear earnest blue eyes, and a mouth whose candour and sweetness a moustache could not hide. Henry of Navarre, before the white lilies of France had dazzled his eyes with their fatal splendour, before the court of the Medici had taught the Bearnois to dissemble, before the sometime Protestant champion had put on that apparel of stainless white in which he went forth to stain his soul with the sin of a diplomatic apostasy,

Such a surprise as this makes a kind of crisis in the eventless record of a woman's life. Diana found herself blushing as the stranger stood near the door awaiting her father's introduction. She was ashamed to think of the wrong her imagination had done him.

"My daughter, Diana Paget—M. Lenoble. I have been telling Diana how much I owed to your hospitality during my stay in Normandy," continued the Captain, with his grandest air. "I regret that I can only receive you in an apartment quite unworthy the seigneur of Côtenoir.—A charming place, my dear Diana, which I should much like you to see on some future occasion.—Will you take some tea, Lenoble?—Diana, a cup of tea.—The Pagets are a fallen race, you see, my dear sir, and a cup of tea in a lodging-house parlour is the best entertainment I can give to a friend. The Cromie Pagets of Hertfordshire will give you dinner in gold plate, with a footman standing behind the chair of every guest; but our branch is a younger and a poorer one, and I, among others, am paying the price of youthful follies."

Gustave Lenoble looked sympathetic, but the glance of sympathy was directed to Diana, and not to the male representative of the younger Pagets. To pity the distressed damsel was an attribute of the Lenoble mind; and Gustave had already begun to pity Miss Paget, and to wonder what her fate in life would be, with no better protector than a father who was confessedly a pauper. He saw that the young lady was very handsome, and he divined, from some indefinable expression of her face, that she was proud; and as he thought of his own daughters, and their easy life and assured future, the contrast seemed to him very cruel.

Chivalrous as the house of Lenoble might be by nature, he could scarcely have felt so keen an interest in Captain Paget's daughter at the first glance, if his sympathies had not been already enlisted for her. The noble Horatio, though slow to act a father's part, had shown himself quick to make capital out of his daughter's beauty and virtues when the occasion offered.

In his intercourse with the seigneur of Côtenoir, which had developed from a mere business acquaintance into friendship, Captain Paget had discoursed with much eloquence upon the subject of his motherless daughter; and M. Lenoble, having daughters of his own, also motherless, lent him the ear of sympathy.

"I have heard much of you, Miss Paget," said Gustave presently, "and of your devotion to your father. He has no more favourite theme than your goodness."

Diana blushed, and Diana's father blushed also. That skilled

diplomatist felt the awkwardness of the situation, and was prompt to the rescue.

"Yes," he said, "my daughter has been a heroine. There are Antigones, sir, who show their heroic nature by other service than the leading to and fro of a blind father. From the earliest age my poor child has striven to stand alone; too proud, too noble to be a burden on a parent whose love would have given all, but whose means could give but little. And now she comes to me from her home among strangers, to soothe my hour of pain and infirmity. I trust your daughters may prove as worthy of your love, M. Lenoble."

"They are very dear girls," answered the Frenchman; "but for them life has been all sunshine. They have never known a sorrow except the death of their mother. It is the storm that tests the temper of the tree. I wish they might prove as noble in adversity as Miss Paget has shown herself."

This was more than Diana could bear without some kind of protest.

"You must not take papa's praises *au pied de la lettre*, M. Lenoble," she said; "I have been by no means brave or patient under adversity. There are troubles which one must bear. I have borne mine somehow; but I claim no praise for having submitted to the inevitable."

This was spoken with a certain noble pride which impressed Gustave more than all the father's florid eloquence had done. After this the conversation became less personal. M. Lenoble talked of England. It was not his first visit; but he had only the excursionist's knowledge of the British Isles.

"I have been to Scotland," he said. "Your Scotland is grand, mountainous—all that there is of the most savage and poetic. It is a Switzerland lined with Brittany. But that which mosts speaks to the heart of a stranger is the peaceful beauty of your English landscape."

"You like England, M. Lenoble?" said Diana.

"Have I not reason? My mother was English. I was only five years old when I lost her. She went out of my life like a dream; but I can still recall a faint shadow of her face—an English face—a countenance of placid sadness, very sweet and tender. But why do I talk of these things?"

On this the Frenchman's talk took a gayer turn. This M. Lenoble showed himself a lively and agreeable companion. He talked of Normandy, his daughters and their convent, his little son at Rouen, his aunt Cydalise, the quiet old lady at Beaubocage; his grandfather, his grandmother, the old servants, and everything familiar and dear to him. He told of his family history with boyish candour, untainted by egotism, and seemed much pleased by Diana's apparent interest in his unstudied talk.

He was quite unconscious that the diplomatic Horatio was leading him on to talk of these things, with a view to making the conversation supremely interesting to him. That arch diplomatist knew that there is nothing a man likes better than talking of his own affairs, if he can have a decent excuse for such discourse.

The clock struck nine while Diana was listening, really interested. This glimpse of a life so far apart from her own was a relief, after the brooding introspective reveries which of late had constituted so large a portion of her existence. She started up at the sound of the clock.

"What now, Cinderella?" cried her father. "Have you stopped beyond your time, and will your fairy godmother be angry?"

"No one will be angry, papa; but I did not mean to stay so late. I am sorry your description of Normandy has been so interesting, M. Lenoble."

"Come and see Vevinord and Côtenoir, and you will judge for yourself. The town-hall of Vevinord is almost as fine as that of Louvain; and we have a church that belongs to the time of Dagobert."

"She shall see them before long," said the Captain; "I shall have business in Rouen again before the next month is out; and if my daughter is a good girl, I will take her over there with me."

Diana stared at her father in utter bewilderment. What could be the meaning of this sudden display of affection?

"I should not be free to go with you, papa, even if you were able to take me," she replied, somewhat coldly; "I have other duties."

She felt assured that there was some lurking motive, some diplomatic art at the bottom of the Captain's altered conduct, and she could not altogether repress her scorn. The astute Horatio saw that he had gone a little too far, and that his only child was not of the stuff to be moulded at will by his dexterous hands.

"You will come and see me again, Diana?" he said in a pleading tone: "I am likely to be a prisoner in this room for a week or more."

"Certainly, papa; I will come if you wish it. When shall I come?"

"Well, let me see—to-day is Thursday; can you come on Monday?"

"Yes, I will come on Monday."

A cab was procured, and Miss Paget was conducted to that vehicle by her new acquaintance, who showed a gallant anxiety for her comfort on the journey, and was extremely careful about

the closing of the windows. She arrived at Bayswater before ten, but being forbidden to talk of M. Lenoble, could give but a scanty account of her evening.

"And was your papa kind, dear?" asked Charlotte, "and did he seem pleased to see you?"

"He was much kinder and more affectionate than usual, Lotta dear; so much so, that he set me wondering. Now, if I were as confiding and eager to think well of people as you are, I should be quite delighted by this change. As it is, I am only mystified. I should be very glad if my father and I could be drawn closer together; very glad if my influence could bring about an amendment in his life."

While Miss Paget was discussing her father's affectionate and novel behaviour, the noble Horatio was meditating, by his solitary hearth, upon the events of the evening.

"I'm half-inclined to think he's hit already," mused the Captain. "I must not allow myself to be deluded by manner. A Frenchman's gallantry rarely means much; but Lenoble is one of those straightforward fellows whose thoughts may be read by a child. He certainly seemed pleased with her; interested and sympathetic, and all that kind of thing. And she is an uncommonly handsome girl, and might marry any one if she had the opportunity. I had no idea she was so handsome until to-night. I suppose I never noticed her by candlelight before. By Jove! I ought to have made her an actress, or singer, or something of that kind. And so I might, if I'd known her face would light up as it does. I wish she wasn't so impracticable—always cutting in with some awkward speech, that makes me look like a fool, when, if she had an ounce of common sense, she might see that I'm trying to make her fortune. Yes, egad, and such a fortune as few girls drop into now-a-days! Some of your strait-laced church-going people would call me a neglectful father to that girl, I daresay; but I think if I succeed in making her the wife of Gustave Lenoble, I shall have done my duty in a way that very few fathers can hope to surpass. Such a high-principled fellow as Lenoble is too!—and *that* is a consideration."

CHAPTER III.

"WHAT DO WE HERE, MY HEART AND I?"

After that first summons to Chelsea, Diana went many times—twice and three times a week—to comfort and tend her invalid father. Captain Paget's novel regard for his only child seemed to increase with the familiarity of frequent intercourse.

"I have had very great pleasure in making your acquaintance, my dear Diana," he said one day, in the course of a *tête-à-tête*

with his daughter; "and I am charmed to find you everything that a well-born and well-bred young woman ought to be. I am sure you have excellent reason to be grateful to your cousin, Priscilla Paget, for the excellent education you received in her abode; and you have some cause to thank me for the dash and style imparted to your carriage and manner by our foreign wanderings."

The Captain said this with the air of a man who had accompanied his daughter on the grand tour solely with a view to her intellectual improvement. He really thought she had reason to be grateful to him for those accidents of his nomadic life which had secured her a good accent for French and German, and the art of putting on her shawl.

"Yes, my dear child," he continued with dignity, "it affords me real gratification to know you better. I need scarcely say that when you were the associate of my pilgrimage, you were not of an age to be available as a companion. To a man of the world like myself, a young person who has not done growing must always savour somewhat of the schoolroom and the nursery. I am not going to repeat the Byronic impertinence about bread-and-butter; but the society of a girl of the hobbledehoy age is apt to be insipid. You are now a young woman, and a young woman of whom any father might with justice be proud."

After a few such speeches as these, Diana began to think that it was just possible her father might really experience some novel feeling of regard for her. It might be true that his former coldness had been no more than a prejudice against the awkwardness of girlhood.

"I was shabby and awkward, I daresay, in those days," she thought; "and then I was always asking papa for money to buy new clothes; and that may have set him against me. And now that I am no burden upon him, and can talk to him and amuse him, he may feel more kindly disposed towards me."

There was some foundation for this idea. Captain Paget had felt himself more kindly disposed towards his only child from the moment in which she ceased to be an encumbrance upon him. Her sudden departure from Forêtdechêne had been taken in very good part by him.

"A very spirited thing for her to do, Val," he had said, when informed of the fact by Mr. Hawkehurst; "and by far the best thing she could do, under the circumstances."

From that time his daughter had never asked him for a sixpence, and from that time she had risen steadily in his estimation. But the feeling which he now exhibited was more than placid approval; it was an affection at once warm and exacting. The fact was, that Horatio Paget saw in his daughter the high-road

to the acquirement of a handsome competence for his declining years. His affection was sincere so far as it went; a sentiment inspired by feelings purely mercenary, but not a hypocritical assumption. Diana was, therefore, so much the more likely to be softened and touched by it.

She was softened, deeply touched by this late awakening of feeling. The engagement of Valentine and Charlotte had left her own life very blank, very desolate. It was not alone the man she loved who was lost to her; Charlotte, the friend, the sister, seemed also slipping away from her. As kind, as loving, as tender as of old, this dear friend and adopted sister still might be, but no longer wholly her own. Over the hearts of the purest Eros reigns with a too despotic power, and mild affection is apt to sneak away into some corner of the temple on whose shrine Love has descended. This mild affection is but a little twinkling taper, that will burn steadily on, perhaps unseen amidst the dazzling glory of Love's supernal lamp, to be found shining benignantly when the lamp is shattered.

For Charlotte, Valentine—and for Valentine, Charlotte—made the sum-total of the universe at this time; or, at best, there was but a small balance which included all the other cares and duties, affections and pleasures, of life. Of this balance Diana had the lion's share; but she felt that things had changed since those days of romantic school-girl friendship in which Charlotte had talked of never marrying, and travelling with her dearest friend Diana amongst all the beautiful scenes they had read of, until they found the loveliest spot in the world, where they would establish themselves in an ideal cottage, and live together for the rest of their lives, cultivating their minds and their flower-garden, working berlin-wool chairs for their ideal drawing-room, and doing good to an ideal peasantry, who would be just poor enough to be interesting, and sickly enough to require frequent gifts of calf's-foot jelly and green tea.

Those foolish dreams were done with now; and that other dream, of a life to be spent with the reckless companion of her girlhood, was lost to Diana Paget. There was no point to which she could look forward in the future, no star to lure her onward upon life's journey. Her present position was sufficiently comfortable; and she told herself that she must needs be weak and wicked if she were not content with her lot. But beyond the present she dared not look, so blank was the prospect—a desert, without even the mirage; for her dreams and delusions were gone with her hope.

Possessed by such a sense of loneliness, it is scarcely strange if there seemed to her a gleam of joy, a faint glimmer of hope, in the newly awakened affection of her father. She began to believe him, and to take comfort from the thought that he was drifting

to a haven where he might lie moored, with other battered old hulks of pirate and privateer, inglorious and at rest. To work for him and succour him in his declining years seemed a brighter prospect to this hopeless woman of four-and-twenty than a future of lonely independence. "It is the nature of woman to lean," says the masculine philosopher; but is it not rather her nature to support and sustain, or else why to her is entrusted the sublime responsibility of maternity? Diana was pleased to think that a remorseful reprobate might be dependent on her toil, and owe his reformation to her influence. She was indeed a new Antigone, ready to lead him in his moral blindness to an altar of atonement more pure than the ensanguined shrine of the Athenian Eumenides.

Her visits to Omega Street were not entirely devoted to *tête-à-têtes* with her father. By reason of those coincidences which are so common to the lives of some people, it generally happened that M. Lenoble dropped in upon his invalid friend on the very day of Miss Paget's visit. M. Lenoble was in London on business, and this business apparently necessitated frequent interviews with Captain Paget. Of course such interviews could not take place in the presence of Diana. Gustave was wont, therefore, to wait with praiseworthy patience until the conclusion of the young lady's visit; and would even, with an inconsistent gallantry, urge her to prolong her stay to its utmost limit.

"It will always be time for my affairs, Miss Paget," he urged, "and I know how your father values your society; and he well may value it. I only hope my daughters will be as good to me, if I have the gout, by-and-by."

Diana had spent nearly a dozen evenings in Omega Street, and on each of those evenings had happened to meet M. Lenoble. She liked him better on every occasion of these accidental meetings. He was indeed a person whom it was difficult for any one to dislike, and in the thirty-four years of his life had never made an enemy. She had been pleased with him on the first evening; his bright handsome face, his courteous reverence for her sex—expressed in every word, every tone, every look—his sympathy with all good thoughts, his freshness and candour, were calculated to charm the coldest and most difficult of judges. Diana liked, and even admired him, but it was from an abstract point of view. He seemed a creature as remote from her own life as a portrait of Henry of Navarre, seen and admired in some royal picture-gallery to-day, to fade out of her memory to-morrow.

There was only one point in connection with Gustave Lenoble which occupied her serious thoughts; and this was the nature of his relations with her father.

This was a subject that sorely troubled her. Hope as she

might for the future, she could not shut her eyes to the past. She knew that her father had lived for years as a cheat and a trickster—now by one species of falsehood and trickery, now by another—rarely incautious, but always unscrupulous. How had this village seigneur of Normandy fallen into the Captain's toils; and what was the nature of the net that was spread for him?

The talk of business, the frequent interviews, the evident elation of her father's spirits, combined to assure her that some great scheme was in progress, some commercial enterprise, perhaps not entirely dishonest—nay even honest, when regarded from the sanguine speculator's point of view, but involving the hazard of Gustave Lenoble's fortune.

"It is quite as easy for my father to delude himself as it is for him to delude others. This M. Lenoble is ignorant of English commerce, no doubt, and will be ready to believe anything papa tells him. And he is so candid, so trusting, it would be very hard if he were to be a loser through his confidence in papa. His daughters, too; the hazard of his fortune is peril to their future." Such doubts and fears, gradually developed by reflection took stronger hold on Miss Paget's mind after every fresh visit to Omega Street. She saw the Frenchman's light-hearted confidence in all humanity, her father's specious manner and air of quixotic honour. His sanguine tone, his excellent spirits, filled her with intolerable alarm. Alas! when had she ever seen her father in good spirits, except when some gentlemanly villany was in progress?

Miss Paget endured this uneasiness of mind as long as she could, and then determined to warn the supposed victim. She planned the mode of her warning, and arranged for herself a diplomatic form which would reflect the least possible discredit upon her father; and having once come to this resolution, she was not slow to put it into effect.

When her father was about to send for a cab to convey her back to Bayswater, after her next visit to Omega Street, she surprised him by intercepting his order.

"There is a cab-stand in Sloane Square, papa," she said; "and if M. Lenoble will be so kind as to take me there, I—I would rather get the cab from the stand. The man charges more when he is fetched off the rank, I believe."

She could think of no better excuse for seeing Gustave alone than this most sordid pretence. She blushed as she thought how mean a sound it must have in the ears of the man for whose advantage she was plotting. Happily M. Lenoble was not among the people who see nothing but meanness in the desire to save sixpence. His aunt Cydalise had shown him the loveliness of poverty; for there are vows of holy poverty that

need no spoken formula, and that are performed without the cloister.

"Poor girl!" thought M. Lenoble; "I dare say even the cost of her coach is a consideration with her; and one dare not pay the coachman."

This was how Gustave read that blush of shame which for a moment dyed Diana's cheek. Her father's was a very different reading.

"The minx sees my game, and is playing into my hands," thought he. "So demure as she is, too! I should never have supposed her capable of such a clever manœuvre to secure ten minutes' *tête-à-tête* with an eligible admirer."

He bade his daughter good night with more than usual effusion. He began to think that she might prove herself worthy of him after all.

The district between Omega Street and Sloane Square is after dusk of all places the most solitary. It is the border-land of Pimlico, or, to borrow from Sidney Smith, the knuckle end of Belgravia. In these regions of desolation and smoke-blackened stucco Diana and her companion were as secure from the interruption of the jostling crowd as they might have been in the primeval forests of Central America.

Miss Paget's task was not a pleasant one. Shape her warning as she might, it must reflect some discredit upon her father. He had of late been kind to her; she felt this keenly to-night, and it seemed that the thing she was about to do was a sort of parricide. Not against her father's life was her cruel hand to be lifted; but her still more cruel tongue was to slay her father's good name.

"This M. Lenoble likes him and trusts him," she thought to herself. "What a happiness for that poor broken-down old man to have so kind a friend! And I am going to interfere in a manner that may put an end to this friendship?"

This is the shape which her thoughts assumed as she walked silently by Gustave's side, with her hand lying lightly on his arm. He spoke to her two or three times about the dulness of the neighbourhood, the coldness of the night, or some other equally thrilling subject; but, finding by her replies that she was thinking deeply, he made no further attempt at conversation.

"Poor child! she has some trouble on her mind, perhaps," he thought to himself sadly, for his sympathy with this young lady was a very profound feeling. This was the first occasion on which he had ever been alone with her, and he wondered to find what a strange emotion was developed by the novelty of the situation. He had married at twenty years of age, and had never known those brief fancies or foolish passions which waste

the freshness of mind and heart. He had married a wife whom he never learned to love; but his nature was so essentially a happy one, that he had failed to discover the something wanting in his life. In all relations—as grandson, husband, father, master—he had been "all simply perfect," as Mademoiselle Cydalise pronounced him; and in a mind occupied by cares for the welfare and happiness of others, he had never found that blank which needed to be filled in order to make his own life completely happy. Only of late, in his thirty-fourth year, had he come to the knowledge of a feeling deeper than dutiful regard for an invalid wife, or affectionate solicitude for motherless children; only of late had he felt his heart stirred by a more thrilling emotion than that placid resignation to the will of Providence which had distinguished his courtship of Mademoiselle de Nérague.

They had nearly reached Sloane Square before Diana took courage to broach the subject so naturally repugnant to her. She had need to remember that the welfare of M. Lenoble and all belonging to him might be dependent on her fortitude.

"M. Lenoble," she began at last, "I am going to say something I shall find it most painful to utter, but which I feel it my duty to say to you. I can only ask you to receive it in a generous spirit."

"But, my dear Miss Paget, I pray you not to say anything that is disagreeable to you. Why should you give yourself pain?—why——"

"Because it is my duty to warn you of a danger which I know only too well, and of which you may be quite ignorant. You are my father's friend, M. Lenoble; and he has very few friends. I should be sorry if anything I were to say should rob him of your regard."

"Nothing that you say shall rob him of my friendship. But why should you persist thus to say anything that is painful? What can you tell me that I do not know, or that I cannot guess? Will you tell me that he is poor? But I know it. That he is a broken-down gentleman? And that also I know. What, then, would you tell me? That he has a daughter who is to him a treasure without price? Ah, mademoiselle, what must I be if I did not know that also?—I, who have contemplated that daughter so many times—ah, so many!—when she could not know with what sympathy my eyes watched her dutiful looks, with what profound emotion my heart interpreted her life of affectionate sacrifice."

There was a warmth, a tenderness in his tones which touched Diana's heart as it had not been touched of late. Suddenly, unexpectedly, the full meaning of those tender accents came home to her. The love that she had once dreamed of from the lips of

another spoke to her to-night in the words of this stranger. The sympathy for which she had yearned long ago, in the days of her wanderings with Valentine, was given to her to-night without stint or measure. Unhappily it came too late; and it did not come from the only lips which, as it seemed to her to-night, could make sympathy precious or love divine. But to this lonely girl a good man's affection seemed a treasure for which she must needs be deeply grateful. It was something to discover that she could be loved.

"I too," she said to herself,—"I, of whose presence Valentine is scarcely conscious when he enters a room where Charlotte and I are together; I, whom he greets day after day with the same careless words, the same indifferent look; I, who might fade and waste day by day with some slow disease, until I sank into the grave, before *he* would be conscious of any change in my face,—is it possible that amongst the same race of beings there can be any creature so widely different from Valentine Hawkehurst as to love *me?*"

This was the bitter complaint of her heart as she compared the tenderness of this stranger with the indifference of the man to whom, for three long years of her girlhood, she had given every dream, every thought, every hope of her existence. She could not put him away from her heart all at once. The weak heart still fondly clung to the dear familiar image. But the more intensely she had felt the cold neglect of Valentine, the more grateful to her seemed the unsought affection of Gustave Lenoble.

"You know me as little as you know my father, M. Lenoble," she said, after a long pause, during which they had walked to the end of the long dull street, and were close to the square. "Let us go back a little way, please; I have much more to say. I wish you to be my father's friend always, but, if possible, without danger to yourself. My father is one of those sanguine people who are always ready to embark in some new enterprise, and who go on hoping and dreaming, after the failure of a dozen schemes. He has no money, that I know of, to lose himself, and that fact may make him, unconsciously, reckless of other people's money. I have heard him speak of business relations with you, M. Lenoble, and it is on that account I venture to speak so plainly. I do not want my poor father to delude you, as he has often deluded himself. If you have already permitted him to involve you in any speculation, I entreat you to try to withdraw from it—to lose a little money, if necessary, rather than to lose all. If you are not yet involved, let my warning save you from any hazard."

"My dear Miss Paget, I thank you a thousand times for your advice, your noble thoughtfulness for others. But no, there is

no hazard. The business in which your father is occupied for me is not a speculation. It involves no risk beyond the expenditure of a few thousand francs, which, happily, I can afford to lose. I am not at liberty to tell you the nature of the business in question, because I have promised your father to keep that a secret. Dear young lady, you need have no fear for me. I am not a rash speculator. The first years of my life were passed in extreme poverty—the poverty that is near neighbour to starvation. That is a lesson one cannot forget. How shall I thank you for your concern for me?—so generous, so noble!"

"It was only my duty to warn you of my poor father's weakness," replied Diana. "If I needed thanks, your kindness to him is the only boon I could ask. He has bitter need of a friend."

"And he shall never lack one while I live, if only for your sake." The last half of the sentence was spoken in lower tones than the first. Diana was conscious of the lurking tenderness of those few words, and the consciousness embarrassed her. Happily they had reached the end of the quiet street by this time, and had emerged into the busier square. No more was said till they reached the cab-stand, when Diana wished her companion good night.

"I am going back to Normandy in a week, Miss Paget; shall I see you again before I leave England?"

"I really don't know; our meetings are generally accidental, you see."

"O yes, of course, always accidental," replied Gustave, smiling.

"I am sorry you are going to leave London—for papa's sake."

"And I, too, am sorry—for my own sake. But, you see, when one has daughters, and a farm, and a château, one must be on the spot. I came to England for one week only, and I have stayed six."

"You have found so much to amuse you in London?"

"Nay, mademoiselle, so much to interest me."

"It is almost the same thing, is it not?"

"A thousand times no! To be amused and to be interested—ah, what can be so widely different as those two conditions of mind!"

"Indeed! Good night, Mr. Lenoble. Please ask the cabman to drive as fast as he can venture to do with consideration for his horse. I am afraid I shall be late, and my friends will be anxious about me."

"You will be late. You consider your friends at Bayswater, and you consider even the cabman's horse. You are charity itself. Will you not consider me a little also, Miss Paget?"

"But how?"

"Let me see you before I go back to Normandy. Your papa

likes to see you twice a week, I know. This is Monday night, will you come to see him on Thursday?"

"If he wishes it."

"He does wish it. Ah, how he wishes it! You will come?"

"If Mrs. Sheldon and Charlotte can spare me."

"They cannot spare you. No one can spare you. That cannot be. It is amongst the things that are impossible. But they will have pity upon—your father, and they will let you come."

"Please ask the cabman to start. Indeed, I shall be late. Good night, M. Lenoble."

"Good night."

He took her hand in his, and kissed it, with the grace of a Bayard. He loved her, and took no trouble to conceal his passion. No shadow of doubt darkened that bright horizon to which M. Lenoble looked with hopeful eyes. He loved this penniless, motherless girl, as it was in the blood of the Lenobles to love the poor and the helpless; especially when poverty and helplessness presented themselves in the guise of youth and beauty. He loved her, and she would love him. But why not? He was ten years her senior, but that makes nothing. His auburn hair and beard, in the style of Henry the Great, could show no streak of grey. His eyes had the brightness of one-and-twenty; for the eyes of a man whose soul preserves its youthfulness will keep their clear lustre for half a century. The tall figure, straight as a dart; the frank handsome face which M. Lenoble saw in the glass when he made his toilet, were not calculated to dishearten a hopeful lover; and Gustave, by nature sanguine, enjoyed his dream of happiness, untroubled by one morbid apprehension.

He loved her, and he would ask her for his wife. She would accept his offer; her father would rejoice in so fortunate an alliance; her friends of Bayswater would felicitate a change so desirable. And when he returned to Normandy he would take her with him, and say to his children, "Behold your mother!" And then the great rambling mansion of Côtenoir would assume a home-like aspect. The ponderous old furniture would be replaced by lightsome appointments of modern fashion; except, of course, in the grand drawing-room, where there were tapestries said to be from the designs of Boucher, and chairs and sofas in the true Louis Quinze style, of immovable bulkiness.

There was but one trifling hitch in the whole scheme of happiness—Diana was a Protestant. Ah, but what then! A creature so sweet, so noble, could not long remain the slave of Anglican heresy. A little talk with Cydalise, a week's "retreat" at the Sacré Cœur, and the thing would be done. The dear girl would renounce her errors, and enter the bosom of the Mother

Church. Pouff! M. Lenoble blew the little difficulty away from his finger-tips, and then wafted a kiss from the same finger-tips to his absent beloved.

"And this noble heart warned me against her own father!" M. Lenoble said to himself, as he walked towards the hotel at Blackfriars where he had taken up his abode, quite unconscious that the foot of Blackfriars Bridge was not the centre of West End London. "How noble, how disinterested! Poor old man! He is, no doubt, a speculator—something even of an adventurer What then? He shall have an apartment at Côtenoir, his place at the family table, his *fauteuil* by the hearth; and there he can do no harm."

There was a strange sentiment in Diana's mind after this evening's conversation with Gustave Lenoble. To feel herself beloved, to know that there was some one creature in the wide crowded world interested in, nay, even attached to her, was a mystery, a surprise, and in some sort a source of pleasure to her. That Gustave Lenoble could ever be any nearer to her than he was at the present time did not occur to her as being within the limits of possibility. She had thrust Valentine from her heart, but the empty chamber could receive no new tenant. It was not swept and garnished; nay, indeed, it was sadly littered with the shreds and patches left by the late occupant. But, while this was so, to know that she could be loved was in some manner sweet to her.

"Ah, now I know that the poet is right," she said to herself. "There is no creature so desolate but some heart responds unto its own. And I have found the generous responsive heart that can pity and love me because I seem so sorely to need love and pity. All my life—my blank, empty life—I will remember and be grateful to him, the first good man who ever called my father friend; the first of all mankind who thought this poor hand worthy to be lifted to his lips.

CHAPTER IV.

SHARPER THAN A SERPENT'S TOOTH.

Having pledged herself to visit Omega Street on Thursday, Diana considered herself bound to perform that promise. She felt, however, that there was some touch of absurdity in the position, for to keep a promise so made was in a manner to keep an appointment with M. Lenoble.

"I dare say he has a habit of falling in love with every young woman he meets," she thought, when she considered his conduct from a more prosaic standpoint than the grateful enthusiasm his generous sympathy had at first awakened in her mind. "I

have heard that it is a Frenchman's faculty to consider himself irresistible, and to avow his adoration for a new divinity every week. And I was so foolish as to fancy there was a depth of feeling in his tone and manner! I am sure he is all that is good and generous; but the falling in love is no doubt a national failing."

She remembered the impertinent advances of divers unknown foreigners whom she had encountered on pier or *digue*, kursaal or beach, in the frequently unprotected hours of her continental wanderings.

She had not seen the best side of the foreign mind in her character of unattended and doubtfully attired English demoiselle. She knew that Gustave Lenoble was of a very different stamp from those specimens of the genus tiger whose impertinent admiration had often wounded and distressed her; but she was inclined to attribute the fault of shallowness to a nature so frank and buoyant as that of her father's friend.

She walked from Bayswater to Chelsea on the appointed Thursday, for the cost of frequent journeys in cabs was more than her purse could supply. The walk across the Park was pleasant even in the bleak March weather, and she entered the little parlour in Omega Street with the bloom of damask roses upon her cheeks.

"How do you do, papa dear?" she began, as she came into the dusky room; but the figure sitting in her father's accustomed place was not that of her father. It was M. Lenoble, who rose to welcome her.

"Is papa worse?" she asked, surprised by the Captain's absence.

"On the contrary, he is better, and has gone out in a hired carriage for a breath of fresh air. I persuaded him to go. He will be back very shortly."

"I wrote to tell him I should be here to-day, but I am very glad he has gone out, for I am sure the air will do him good. Was he well wrapped up, do you know, M. Lenoble?"

"Enveloped in railway-rugs and shawls to his very nose. I arranged all that with my own hands. He looked like an ambassador from all the Russias."

"How kind of you to think of such things!" said Diana gratefully.

"And tell me why should I not think of such things? Do you imagine that it is not a pleasure to me to wait upon your father—for your sake?"

There was some amount of awkwardness in this kind of thing. Diana busied herself with the removal of her hat and jacket, which she laid neatly upon a stony-hearted horsehair sofa. After doing this she placed herself near the window, whence she con-

templated the dusky street, appearing much interested in the movements of the lamp lighter.

"What an admirable way they have of lighting the lamps now," she remarked, with the conversational brilliance which usually marks this kind of situation; "how much more convenient it must be than the old method with the ladder, you know!"

"Yes, I have no doubt," said Gustave, bringing himself to her side with a couple of steps, and planting himself deliberately in a chair next to hers; "but don't you think, as I start for Normandy to-morrow, we might talk of something more interesting than the lamplighter, Miss Paget?"

"I am ready to talk of anything you like," replied Miss Paget, with that charming assumption of unconsciousness which every woman can command on these occasions.

"You are very good. Do you know that when I persuaded your father to go out for an airing, I was prompted by a motive so selfish as to render the proceeding quite diabolical? Don't be alarmed! The doctor gave his permission for the airing, or I should not have attempted such a thing. Hypocrisy I am capable of, but not assassination. You cannot imagine the diplomacy which I exhibited; and all to what end? Can you imagine that?"

"No, indeed."

"That I might secure one half-hour's uninterrupted talk with you; and, unhappily, you are so late that I expect your father's return every minute. He was to be back again before dusk, and the appearance of the lamplighter demonstrates that the dusk has come. I have so much to say, and so little time to say it; so much, Diane——"

She started as he called her thus, as if in that moment of surprise she would have risen from her chair by his side. She knew what was coming, and having expected nothing so desperate, knew not how to arrest the confession that she would fain have avoided hearing. M. Lenoble laid his hand firmly on hers.

"So much, Diane; and yet so little, that all can be told in three words. I love you."

"M. Lenoble!"

"Ah, you are surprised, you wonder, you look at me with eyes of sweet amazement! Dear angel, do you think it is possible to see you and not to love you? To see you once is to respect, to admire, to bow the knee before beauty and goodness; but to see you many times, as I have done, the patient consoler of an invalid and somewhat difficult father—ah, my sweet love, who is there so hard amongst mankind that he should escape from loving you, seeing all that?"

The question had a significance that the speaker knew not. Who amongst mankind? Why, was there not one man for whom she would have been content to be the veriest slave that ever abnegated every personal delight for the love of a hard master? And he had passed her by, indifferent, unseeing. She had worshipped him on her knees, as it seemed to her; and he had left her kneeling in the dust, while he went on to offer himself, heart and soul, at another shrine.

She could not forget these things. The memory and the bitterness of them came back with renewed poignancy at this moment, when the voice of a stranger told her she was beloved.

"My dear one, will you not answer me?" pleaded Gustave, in nowise alarmed by Diana's silence, which seemed to him only the natural expression of a maidenly emotion. "Tell me that you will give me measure for measure; that you will love me as my mother loved my father—with a love that trouble and poverty could never lessen; with a love that was strongest when fate was darkest—a star which the dreary night of sorrow could not obscure. I am ten years older than you by my baptismal register, Diane; but my heart is young. I never knew what love was until I knew you. And yet those who know me best will tell you that I was no unkind husband, and that my poor wife and I lived happily. I shall never know love again, except for you. The hour comes, I suppose, in every man's life; and the angel of his life comes in that appointed hour. Mine came when I saw you. I have spoken to your father, and have his warm approval. He was all encouragement, and hinted that I might be assured of your love. Had he sufficient justification for that half-promise, Diane?"

"He had none," Miss Paget answered gravely, "none except his own wishes. You have made me hear more than I wished to hear, M. Lenoble, for the treasure you offer me is one that I cannot accept. With all my heart I thank you for the love you tell me of. Even if it is, as I can but think it, a passing fancy, I thank you, nevertheless. It is sweet to win the love of a good man. I pray you to believe that with all my heart and mind I honour your generous nature, your noble sympathy with the weak and friendless. If you can give me your friendship, you shall find how I can value a good man's regard, but I cannot accept your love."

"Why not?" asked Gustave, aghast.

"Because I cannot give you measure for measure, and I will not give you less."

"But in time, Diane, in time?"

"Time cannot show me your character in a nobler light than that in which I see it now. You do not lack the power to win a woman's heart, but I have no heart to give. If you will be

my friend, time will increase my affection for you· but time cannot restore the dead."

"Which means that your heart is dead, Diane?"

"Yes," she answered, with unutterable sadness.

"You love some one younger, happier than I?"

"No, M. Lenoble, no one."

"But you have loved? Yes!—a scoundrel, perhaps; a villain, who——"

A spasm of pain contracted his face as he looked at the girl's drooping head; her face, in that dim light, he could not see.

"Tell me this, Diane," he said presently, in an altered voice; "there is no barrier between us—no irrevocable obstacle that must part us for ever? There is no one who can claim you by any right—" He paused; and then added, in a lower voice, "by any wrong?"

"No one," answered Miss Paget, lifting her head, and looking her lover full in the face. Even in that uncertain light he could see the proud steady gaze that seemed the fittest answer of all doubts.

"Thank God!" he whispered. "Ah, how could I fear, even for one moment, that you could be anything but what you seem—the purest among the pure? Why, then, do you reject me? You do not love me, but you ask my friendship; you offer me your friendship, even your affection. Ah, believe me, if those are but real, time will ripen them into love. Your heart is dead. Ah, why should that young heart be dead? It is not dead, Diane; it needs but the fire of true love to warm it into life again. Why should you reject me, since you tell me that you love me; unless you love another? What should divide us?"

"Shadows and memories," Diana replied mournfully,—"vague and foolish; wicked, perhaps; but they come between you and me, M. Lenoble. And since I cannot give you a whole heart, I will give you nothing."

"You have loved some one, some one who did not value your love? Tell me the truth, Diane; you owe me at least as much as that."

"I do owe you the truth. Yes; I have been very foolish. For two or three years of my life there was a person who was our daily companion. He travelled with us—with my father and me; and we saw many changes and troubles together. For a long time he was like my brother; and I doubt if many brothers are as kind to their sisters as he was to me. In his heart that feeling never changed. He was always equally kind, equally careless. Once I deluded myself with the fancy that in his looks and tones, and even in his words, there was some deeper feeling than this careless brotherly kindness; but it was

no more than a delusion. My eyes were opened rudely enough. I saw his heart bestowed elsewhere. Do not think that I am so weak, or so wicked, as to abandon myself to despair because I have been awakened from my foolish dream. I can look the realities of life in the face, M. Lenoble; and I have taught myself to wish all good things for the dear girl who has won the heart that I once thought was mine. The person I am speaking of can boast no superior graces of mind or person. He is only a very commonplace young man, with a certain amount of talent, a disposition inclined to good rather than to evil. But he was the companion of my girlhood; and in losing him it seems to me as if I had lost a part of my youth itself."

To Diana's mind this seemed the end of the discussion. She expected M. Lenoble to bow his head to the inevitable, to utter a friendly farewell, and depart for his Norman home, convinced, if not satisfied. But the light-hearted, easy-tempered Gustave was not a lover of the despairing order, nor an easily answered suppliant.

"And that is all!" he exclaimed, in the cheeriest tone. "A companion of your girlhood, for whom you had a girl's romantic fancy! And the memory of this unspeakable idiot—great Heaven! but how idiotic must this wretch have been, to be loved by you, and not even to know it!—the memory of this *last of the last* is to come between you and me, and divide us for ever? The phantom of this miserable, who could be loved by an angel without knowing it, is to lift its phantasmal hand and thrust me aside—me, Gustave Lenoble, a man, and not an idiot? Ah, thus we blow him to the uttermost end of the world!" cried M. Lenoble, blowing an imaginary rival from the tips of his fingers. "Thus we dismiss him to the Arctic regions, the torrid zone—to the Caucasus, where await vultures to gnaw his liver—wherever earth is most remote and uncomfortable—he and the bread-and-butter miss whom he prefers to my Diane!"

This manner of taking things was quite unexpected by Diana. It was much more pleasant than gloomy despair or sullen resentment; but it was, at the same time, much more difficult to deal with.

"He is gone!" cried Gustave presently; "he is on the topmost heights of Caucasus, and the vultures are sharpening their beaks! And now, tell me, Diane—you will be my wife, will you not? You will be a mother to my children? You will transform the old château of Côtenoir into a pleasant home? You will cease to live amongst strangers? You will come to those who will love and cherish you as their own, their dearest and best and brightest? You will give your poor old father a corner by your fireside? He is old and needs a home for his

last years. For his sake, Diane, for mine, for my children, let your answer be yes! Ah, not so fast!" he cried, as she was about to speak. "Why are you so quick to pronounce your fatal judgment? Think how much depends on your reply—your father's happiness, my children's, mine!"

"It is of yours only I must think," Miss Paget answered earnestly. "You fancy it is so easy for me to say no. Believe me, it would be much easier to say yes. When you speak of my father's declining years, I, who know his weary life so well, would be hard of heart indeed if I were not tempted by the haven you offer. Every word that you say gives me some new proof of your goodness, your generosity. But I will not wrong you because you are generous. I shall always be your grateful friend, but you must seek elsewhere for a wife, M. Lenoble. You will have little difficulty in finding one worthier than I."

"I will seek nowhere else for a wife; I will have no wife but you. I have had a wife of other people's choosing; I will choose one for myself this time. Let us be friends, Diane, since your decision is as irrevocable as the laws of Draco. You are stone, you are adamant; but no matter, we can be friends. Your father will be disappointed. But what then? He is no doubt accustomed to disappointments. My daughters—for them it is a profound affliction to be motherless, but they must support it. Côtenoir must go to wreck and ruin a little longer—a few more rats behind the panelling, a few more moths in the tapestry, that is all. My children say, 'Papa, our home is not comfortable; all is upside-down;' and I reply, 'But what will you, my children? A home without a wife is always upside down.' And then I take them between my arms, in weeping. It is a poignant picture to rend the heart. But what does it matter, Miss Paget? What is that verse of your grand Will?—

> Blow, blow, thou wintry wind;
> And let go weep the stricken hind,
> While harts ungalled go play

Perhaps I have mixed him up somehow; but the meaning is clear."

A hollow-sounding and somewhat awful cough heralded the approach of Captain Paget, who entered the room at this juncture. If the Captain had prolonged his first airing, after six weeks' confinement to the house, until this late period of the afternoon, he would have committed an imprudence which might have cost him dearly. Happily, he had done nothing of the kind, but had re-entered the house unobserved, while Diana and Gustave were conversing close to the window, having

preferred to leave his fly at the end of the street, rather than to incur the hazard of interrupting a critical *tête-à-tête*. The interval that had elapsed since his return had been spent by the Captain in his own bedchamber, and in the immediate neighbourhood of the folding-doors between that apartment and the parlour. What he had heard had been by no means satisfactory to him; and if a look could annihilate, Miss Paget might have perished beneath the Parthian glance which her father shot at her as he came towards the window, with a stereotyped smile upon his lips and unspeakable anger in his heart.

He had heard just enough of the conversation to know th Gustave had been rejected—Gustave, with Côtenoir and handsome independence in the present, and the late John Haygarth's fortune in the future. Rejected by a penniless young woman, who at any moment might find herself without a roof to shelter her from the winds of heaven! Was ever folly, madness, wickedness supreme as this?

Horatio trembled with rage as he took his daughter's hand. She had the insolence to extend her hand for the customary salutation. The Captain's greeting was a grip that made her wince.

"Good-night, Miss Paget," said Gustave gravely, but with by no means the despondent tone of a hopeless lover; "I——well, I shall see you again, perhaps, before I go to Normandy. I doubt if I shall go to-morrow. I have my own reasons for staying—unreasonable reasons, perhaps, but I shall stay."

All this was said in a tone too low to reach Captain Paget's ear.

"Are you going to leave us, Lenoble?" he asked in a quavering voice. "You will not stop and let Di give you a cup of tea as usual?"

"Not to-night, Captain. Good-bye."

He wrung the old man's hand and departed. Captain Paget dropped heavily into a chair, and for some minutes there was silence. Diana was the first to speak.

"I am glad your doctor considered you well enough to go out for a drive, papa," she said.

"Indeed, my dear," answered her father with a groan; "I hope my next drive may be in a different kind of vehicle—the last journey I shall ever take, until they cart away my bones for manure. I believe they do make manure from the bones of paupers in our utilitarian age."

"Papa, how can you talk so horribly! You are better, are you not? M. Lenoble said you were better."

"Yes, I am better, God help me!" answered the old man, too weak alike in mind and body to hide the passion that possessed him. "That is one of the contradictions of the long farce we

call life. If I had been a rich man, with a circle of anxious relations and all the noted men of Savile Row dancing attendance round my bed, I dare say I should have died; but as I happen to be a penniless castaway, with only a lodging-house drudge and a half-starved apothecary to take care of me, and with nothing before me but a workhouse, I live. It is all very well for a man to take things easily when he is ill and helpless, too weak even to think. *That* is not the trying time. The real trial arrives when a little strength comes back to him, and his landlady *begins* to worry him for her rent, and the lodging-house drudge gets tired of pitying him, and the apothecary sends in his bill, and the wretched high-road lies bare and broad before him, and he hears the old order to move on. The moving-on time has come for me, Di; and the Lord alone knows how little *I* know where I am to go."

"Papa, you are not friendless; even I can give you a little help."

"Yes," answered the Captain with a bitter laugh; "a sovereign once a quarter—the scrapings of your pittance! *That* help won't save me from the workhouse."

"There is M. Lenoble."

"Yes, there is M. Lenoble; the man who would have given me a home for my old age: he told me so to-day—a home fit for a gentleman—for the position he now occupies is nothing compared to that which he may occupy a year hence. He would have received me as his father-in-law, without thought or question of my antecedents; and if I have not lived like a gentleman, I might have died like one. This is what he would have done for me. But do you think I can ask anything of him now, after you have refused him? I know of your refusal to be that man's wife. I heard—I saw it in his face. You—a beggar, a friendless wretch, dependent on the patronage of a stockbroker's silly wife—*you* must needs give yourself grand airs, and refuse such a man as that! Do you think such men go begging among young ladies like you, or that they run about the streets, like the roast pigs in the story, begad, with knives and forks in their backs, asking to be eaten?"

The Captain was walking up and down the room in a fever of rage. Diana looked at him with sad wondering eyes. Yes, it was the old selfish nature. The leopard cannot change his spots; and the Horatio Paget of the present was the Horatio Paget of the past.

"Pray don't be angry with me, papa," said Diana sorrowfully; "I believe that I have done my duty."

"Done your fiddlesticks!" cried the Captain, too angry to be careful of his diction. "Your duty to whom? Did you happen to remember, miss, that you owe some duty to me, your father,

but for whom you wouldn't be standing there talking of duty like a tragedy queen? By Jove! I suppose you are too grand a person to consider my trouble in this matter; the pains I took to get Lenoble over to England; the way I made the most of my gout even, in order to have you about me; the way I finessed and diplomatized to bring this affair to a successful issue. And now, when I have succeeded beyond my hopes, you spoil everything, and then dare to stand before me and preach about duty. What do you want in a husband, I should like to know? A rich man? Lenoble is that. A handsome man? Lenoble is that. A gentleman, with good blood in his veins? Lenoble comes of as pure a race as any man in that part of France. A good man? Lenoble is one of the best fellows upon this earth. What is it, then, that you want?"

"I want to give my heart to the man who gives me his."

"And what, in the name of all that's preposterous, is to prevent you giving Gustave Lenoble your heart?"

"I cannot tell you."

"No, nor any one else. But let us have no more of this nonsense. If you call yourself a daughter of mine, you will marry Gustave Lenoble. If not——"

The Captain found himself brought to a sudden stop in his unconscious paraphrase of Signor Capulet's menace to his recalcitrant daughter, Juliet. With what threat could the noble Horatio terrify his daughter to obedience? Before you talk of turning your rebellious child out of doors, you must provide a home from which to cast her. Captain Paget remembered this, and was for the moment reduced to sudden and ignominious silence. And yet there must surely be some way of bringing this besotted young woman to reason.

He sat for some minutes in silence, with his head leaning on his hand, his face hidden from Diana. This silence, this attitude, so expressive of utter despondency, touched her more keenly than his anger. She knew that he was mean and selfish, that it was of his own loss he thought; and yet she pitied him. He was old and helpless and miserable; so much the more pitiable because of his selfishness and meanness. For the heroic soul there is always some comfort; but for the grovelling nature suffering knows no counterbalance. The ills that flesh is heir to seem utterly bitter when there is no grand spirit to dominate the flesh, and soar triumphant above the regions of earthly pain. Captain Paget's mind, to him, was not a kingdom. He could not look declining years of poverty in the face; he was tired of work. The schemes and trickeries of his life were becoming very odious to him; they were for the most part worn out, and had ceased to pay. Of course he had great hopes, in any event, from Gustave Lenoble; but those hopes were depen-

dent on Gustave's inheritance of John Haygarth's estate. He wanted something more tangible than this—he wanted immediate security; and his daughter's marriage with Gustave would have given him that security, and still grander hopes for the future. He had fancied himself reigning over the vassals of Côtenoir, a far more important personage than the real master of that château. He had pictured to himself a *pied-à-terre* in Paris which it might be agreeable for him to secure, for existence in Normandy might occasionally prove *ennuyeux*. These things were what he meant when he talked of a haven for his declining years; and against the daughter who, for some caprice of her own, could hinder his possession of these things, he had no feeling but anger.

Diana compassionated this weak old man, to whose lips the cup of prosperity had seemed so near, from whose lips her hand had thrust it. He had been promised a home, comfort, respectability, friendship—"all that should accompany old age"—and she had prevented the fulfilment of the promise. Heaven knows how pure her motives had been; but as she watched that drooping head, with its silvered hair, she felt that she had been cruel.

"Papa," she began presently, laying her hand carressingly upon her father's neck; but he pushed aside the timid, caressing hand—"papa, you think me very unkind, only because I have done what I believe to be right; indeed it is so, papa dear. In what I said to Gustave Lenoble this evening, I was governed only by my sense of right."

"Indeed!" cried the Captain, with a strident laugh; "and where did you pick up your sense of right, madam, I should like to know? From what Methodist parson's hypocritical twaddle have you learnt to lay down the law to your poor old father about the sense of right? 'Honour your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land,' miss, *That's* what your Bible teaches you; but the Bible has gone out of fashion, I dare say, since I was a young man; and your model young woman of the present generation taunts her father with her sense of right. Will your sense of right be satisfied when you hear of your father rotting in the old-men's ward of a workhouse, or dying on the London stones?"

"I am not unfeeling, papa. With all my heart I pity you; but it is cruel on your part to exaggerate the misery of your position, as I am sure you must be doing. Why should your means of living fail because I refuse to marry M. Lenoble? You have lived hitherto without my help, as I have lived of late without yours. Nothing could give me greater happiness than to know that you were exempt from care; and if my toil can procure you a peaceful home in the future—as I believe it can, or education and will to work must go for nothing—there

shall be no lack of industry on my part. I will work for you, I will indeed, papa—willingly, happily."

"When your work can give me such a home as Côtenoir—a home that one word of yours would secure for me—I will thank you."

"If you will only wait, papa, if you will only have patience——"

"Patience! Wait! Do you know what your are talking about? Do you prate of patience, and waiting, and hope in the future to a man who has no future—to a man whose days are numbered, and who feels the creeping chills of death stealing over him every day as he sits beside his wretched hearth, or labours through his daily drudgery? I can live as I have always lived! Yes; but do you know, or care to know, that with every day life becomes more difficult for me? Your fine friends at Bayswater have done with me. I have spent the last sixpence I shall ever see from Philip Sheldon. Hawkehurst has cut me, like the ungrateful hound he is. When they have squeezed the orange, they throw away the rind. Didn't Voltaire say that, when Frederick of Prussia gave him the go-by? Heaven knows it's true enough; and now you, who by a word might secure yourself a splendid position—yes, I say splendid for a poor drudge and dependent like you, and insure a home for me—you, forsooth, must needs favour me with your high-flown sentiments about your sense of right, and promise me a home in the future, if I will wait and hope! No, Diana, waiting and hoping are done with for me, and I can find a home in the bed of the river without your help."

"You would not be so wicked as to do that!" cried Diana, aghast.

"I don't know about the wickedness of the act. But, rely upon it, when my choice lies between the workhouse and the river, I shall prefer the river. The modern workhouse is no inviting sanctuary, and I dare say many a homeless wretch makes the same choice."

For some minutes there was silence. Diana stood with her elbows resting on the chimneypiece, her face covered with her hands.

"O Lord, teach me to do the thing which is right!" she prayed, and in the next breath acted on the impulse of the moment.

"What would you have me do?" she asked.

"What any one but an idiot would do of her own accord—accept the good fortune that has dropped into your lap. Do you think such luck as yours goes begging every day?"

"You would have me accept Gustave Lenoble's offer, no matter what falsehoods may be involved in my acceptance of it?"

"I can see no reason for falsehood. Any one but an diot would honour such a man; any one but an idiot would thank Providence for such good fortune

"Very well, papa," exclaimed Diana, with a laugh that had no mirthful music, "I will not be the exceptional idiot. If M. Lenoble does me the honour to repeat his offer—and I think from his manner he means to do so—I will accept it."

"He shall repeat it!" cried the Captain, throwing off his assumption of the tragic father. The Œdipus Coloneus, the Lear—the venerable victim of winter winds and men's ingratitude—was transformed in a moment into an elderly Jeremy Diddler, lined with Lord Foppington. "He shall repeat it; I will have him at your feet to-morrow. Yes, Di, my love, I pledge myself to bring that about, without compromise to your maidenly pride or the dignity of a Paget. My dear child, I ought to have known that reflection would show you where your duty lies. I fear I have been somewhat harsh, but you must forgive me, Di; I have set my heart on this match, for your happiness as well as my own. I could not stand the disappointment; though I admired, and still admire, the high feeling, and all that kind of thing, which prompted your refusal. A schoolgirlish sentimentality, child, but with something noble in it; not the sentimentality of a vulgar schoolgirl. The blue blood will show itself, my love; and now—no, no, don't cry. You will live to thank me for to-night's work; yes, my child, to thank me, when you look round your comfortable home by and by—when my poor old bones are mouldering in their unpretending sepulchre—and say to yourself, 'I have my father to thank for this. Adverse circumstances forbade his doing his duty as happier fathers are allowed the privilege of doing theirs, but it was his forethought, his ever-watchful care, which secured me an admirable husband and a happy home.' Mark my words, the time will come when you will say this, my dear."

"I will try to think of you always kindly, papa," Miss Paget answered in a low sad voice; "and if my marriage can secure your happiness and Gustave Lenoble's, I am content. I only fear to take too much, and give too little."

"My love, you must certainly be the lineal descendant of Don Quixote. Too much, and too little, forsooth! Let Lenoble find a handsomer woman, or a more elegant woman, by gad, elsewhere! Such a woman as a duke might be proud to make his duchess, by Jove! There shall be no sense of obligation on our side, my love. Gustave Lenoble shall be made to feel that he gets change for his shilling. Kiss me, child, and tell me you forgive me for being a little rough with you, just now."

"Forgive you?—yes, papa. I dare say you are wiser than I. Why should I refuse M. Lenoble? He is good and kind, and

will give us a happy home? What more can I want? Do I want to be like Charlotte, to whom life seems all poetry and brightness?"

"And who is going to throw herself away upon a penny-a-liner, by Jove!" interjected the Captain.

"Can *I* hope to be like that girl, with her happy ignorance of life, her boundless love and trust! O, no, no, papa; those things are not for me."

She laid her head upon her father's breast, and sobbed like a child. This was her second farewell to the man she had loved, the dreams she had dreamed. The Captain comforted her with a paternal embrace, but was as powerless to comprehend her emotion as if he had found himself suddenly called upon to console the sorrows of a Japanese widow.

"Hysterical," he murmured. "These noble natures are subject to that kind of thing. And now, my love," he continued, in a more business-like tone, "let us talk seriously. I think it would be very advisable for you to leave Bayswater, and take up your abode in these humble lodgings with me immediately."

"Why, papa?"

"The reason is sufficiently obvious, my love. It is not right that you should continue to eat the bread of dependence. As the future wife of Gustave Lenoble—and, in this case, the word future means immediately——"

"Papa," cried Diana suddenly, "you will not hurry me into this marriage? I have consented for your sake. You will not be so ungenerous as to——"

"As to hurry you? No, my dear, of course not. There shall be no indecent haste. Your wishes, your delicate and disinterested motives, shall be consulted before all things; yes, my love," cried the Captain, sorely afraid of some wavering on the part of his daughter, and painfully anxious to conciliate her, "all shall be in accordance with your wishes. But I must urge your immediate removal from Bayswater; first, because M. Lenoble will naturally wish to see you oftener than he can while you are residing with people whose acquaintance I do not want him to make; and secondly, because you have no further need of Mrs. Sheldon's patronage."

"It has been kindness, affection, papa—never patronage. I could not leave Mrs. Sheldon or Charlotte abruptly or ungraciously, upon any consideration. They gave me a home when I most bitterly needed one. They took me away from the dull round of schoolroom drudgery, that was fast changing me into a hard hopeless joyless automaton. My first duty is to them."

The Captain's angry sniff alone expressed the indignation which this impious remark inspired.

"My next shall be to you and M. Lenoble. Let me give Mrs. Sheldon due notice of the change in our plans."

"What do you call due notice?" asked Horatio, peevishly.

"A quarter's notice."

"O, indeed! Then for three months you are to dance attendance upon Mrs. Sheldon, while M. Lenoble is waiting to make you his wife."

"I must consult the wishes of my friends, papa."

"Very well, my dear," replied the Captain, with a sigh that was next of kin to a groan; "you must please yourself and your friends, I suppose; your poor old father is a secondary consideration." And then, timeously mindful of the skirmish he had just had with his daughter, Captain Paget made haste to assure her of his regard and submission.

"All shall be as you please, my love," he murmured. "There, go into my room, and smooth your hair, and bathe your eyes, while I ring for the tea."

Diana obeyed. She found eau-de-cologne and the most delicate of Turkey sponges on her father's wash-handstand; jockey-club, and ivory-backed brushes, somewhat yellow with age, but bearing crest and monogram, on his dressing-table. The workhouse did not seem quite so near at hand as the Captain had implied; but with these sanguine people it is but a step from disappointment to despair.

"What am I to tell Mrs. Sheldon, papa?" she asked, when she was pouring out her father's tea.

"Well, I think you had better say nothing, except that my circumstances have somewhat improved, and that my failing health requires your care."

"I hate secrets, papa."

"So do I, my dear; but half-confidences are more disagreeable than secrets."

Diana submitted. She secretly reserved to herself the right to tell Charlotte anything she pleased. From that dear adopted sister she would hide nothing.

"If M. Lenoble should repeat his offer, and I should accept it, I will tell her all," she thought. "It will make that dear girl happy to know that there is some one who loves me, besides herself."

And then she thought of the strange difference of fate that gave to this Charlotte Halliday, with her rich stepfather and comfortable surroundings, a penniless soldier of fortune for a lover, while to her, the spendthrift adventurer's daughter, came a wealthy suitor.

"Will hers be the dinner of herbs, and mine the stalled ox?" she thought. "Ah, Heaven forbid! Why is it so difficult to love wisely, so easy to love too well?"

She remembered the cynical French proverb, "When we can not have what we love, we must love what we have." But the cynical proverb brought her no comfort.

She went back to Bayswater with a strange bewildered feeling; after having promised her father to go to Omega Street whenever he sent for her. There was no actual pain in her mind, no passionate desire to recall her promise, no dread horror of the step to which she had pledged herself. The feeling that oppressed her was the sense that such a step should have been the spontaneous election of her grateful heart, proud of a good man's preference, instead of a weak submission to a father's helplessness.

Book the Fifth.

THE FIRST ACT OF MR. SHELDON'S DRAMA.

CHAPTER I.

TAKEN BY STORM.

Two days after her interview with Gustave Lenoble, Miss Paget received a brief note from her father, summoning her again to Omega Street.

"*He* has not gone back to Normandy," wrote the Captain. "My child, he positively worships the ground you walk upon. Ah, my love, *it is something to have a father!* I need scarcely tell you that his first idea of your excellence was inspired by those glowing descriptions of your goodness, your beauty, your heroism, which I favoured him with, *en passant*, during our conversations at Côtenoir, where the happy accident of a business transaction first introduced me to him. The interests of my only child have ever been near and dear to me; and where a duller man would have perceived only a wealthy stranger, my paternal instincts recognized at a glance the predestined husband of my daughter. It needed my wide experience of life—and, as I venture to believe, my subtle knowledge of the human heart—to understand that a man who had lived for five-and-thirty years buried alive in a French province—a charming place, my love, and for your refined taste replete with interest—never seeing a mortal except his immediate neighbours, would be the man of men to fall in love with the first attractive young woman he met among strangers. Come to me this afternoon without fail, and come early.—Yours, H. N. C. P."

Diana obeyed this summons submissively, but still troubled by that strange sense of bewilderment which had affected her since her stormy interview with Captain Paget. She was not quite certain of herself. The old dreams—the sweet foolish girlish fancies—were not yet put away altogether from her mind; but she knew that they were foolish, and she was half-inclined to believe that there had been some wisdom in her father's scorn.

"What do I want more?" she asked herself. "He is good and brave and true, and he loves me. If I were a princess, my marriage would be negotiated for me by other people, and I should have reason to consider myself very happy if the man whom the state selected for my husband should prove as good a man as Gustave Lenoble. And he loves me; me, who have never before had power over a man's heart!"

She walked across Hyde Park on this occasion, as on the last; and her thoughts, though always confused—mere rags and scraps of thought—were not all unpleasant. There was a smile, half shy, half tender, on her face as she went into the little sitting-room where Gustave was waiting for her. She had seen his hat and overcoat in the passage, and knew that he was there waiting for her. To this poor desolate soul there was something sweet in the idea of being waited for.

As she stood but a little within the doorway, blushing, almost trembling with the sense of her changed position, her lover came across the room and took her in his arms. The strong brave arms held her to his breast; and in that one embrace he took her to his heart, and made her his own for ever.

In every story of life-long affection, there is one moment in which the bond is sealed. Diana looked up at the frank tender face, and felt that she had found her conqueror. Master, friend, protector, husband, adoring and devoted lover, gallant and fearless champion—he was all; and she divined his power and his worth as she glanced shyly upward, ashamed to be so lightly won.

"M. Lenoble," she faltered, trying to withdraw herself from the strong encircling arm that held her, as if by right.

"Gustave, now and for ever, my Diane! There shall be no more Monsieur Lenoble. And in a few weeks it shall be 'my husband.' Your father has given me to you. He tells me to laugh at your refusals your scruples; to assail you like your Shakespeare's Petruchio assails his Katherine—with audacious insolence that will not be denied. And I shall take his advice. Look up into my face, dear angel, and defy me to take his advice."

Happily the dear angel looked only downwards. But M Lenoble was resolved to have an agreeable response.

"See, then, thou canst not defy me!" he cried, in the only language he spoke; and the "*tu*" for the first time sounded very tender, very sweet. "Thou canst not tell me thou art angry with me. And the other—the imbecile;—he is gone for ever, is he not? Ah, say yes!"

"Yes, he is gone," said Diana, almost in a whisper.

"Is he quite gone? The door of thine heart locked against him, his luggage thrown out of the window?"

"He is gone!" she murmured softly. "He could not hold his place against you—you are so strong—so brave; and he was only a shadow. Yes, he is gone."

She said this with a little sigh of relief. It was in all sincerity that she answered her suitor's question. She felt that a crisis had come in her life—the first page of a new volume; and the old sad tear-blotted book might be cast away.

"Dear angel, wilt thou ever learn to love me?" asked Gustave, in a half-whisper, bending down his bearded face till his lips almost touched her cheek.

"It is impossible not to love you," she answered softly. And indeed it seemed to her as if this chivalrous Gaul was a creature to command the love of women, the fear of men; an Achilles *en frac;* a Bayard without his coat of mail; Don Quixote in his youth, generous, brave, compassionate, tender, and with a brain not as yet distempered by the reading of silly romances.

Captain Paget emerged from his den as the little love scene ended. He affected a gentlemanly unconsciousness of the poetry involved in the situation, was pleasantly anxious about the tea-tray, the candles, and minor details of life; and thus afforded the lovers ample time in which to recover their composure. The Frenchman was in no wise discomposed; he was only abnormally gay, with a little air of triumph that was not unpleasing. Diana was pale; but there was an unwonted light in her eyes, and she had by no means the appearance of a victim newly offered on the sacrificial altar of filial duty. In sober truth, Miss Paget was happier to-night than she had been for a long time. At three-and-twenty she was girl enough to rejoice in the knowledge that she was truly loved, and woman enough to value the sense of peace involved in the security of a prosperous future.

If she was grateful to her lover—and the affection he had inspired in her heart had grown out of gratitude—it was no mercenary consideration as to his income or position that made her grateful. She thanked him for his love—that treasure which she had never expected to possess; she thanked him because he had taken her by the hand, and led her out of the ranks of lonely dependent womanhood, and seated her upon a throne, on the steps whereof he was content to kneel. Whether the throne

were a rushen chair in some rustic cottage, or a gilded *fauteuil* in a palace, she cared very little. It was the subject's devotion that was new and sweet to her.

She went to Charlotte's room that night, when Mr. Sheldon's small household was at rest; as she had gone on Chrismas Eve to renounce her lover and to bless her rival. This time it was a new confession she went to make, and a confession that involved some shame. There is nothing so hard to confess as inconstancy; and every woman is not so philosophic as Rahel Varnhagen, who declared that to be constant was not always to love the same person, but always to love some one.

Miss Paget seated herself at Charlotte's feet, as she had done on that previous occasion. The weather was still cold enough to make a fire very pleasant, though it was more than two months since the Christmas bells had rung out upon the frosty air. Diana sat on a low hassock, playing with the tassels of her friend's dressing-gown, anxious to make her confession, and solely at a loss for words in which to shape so humiliating an avowal.

"Charlotte," she began abruptly at last, "have you any idea when you and Valentine are to be married?"

Miss Halliday gave a little cry of surprise.

"Why, of course not, Di! How can you ask such a question? Our marriage is what uncle George calls a remote contingency. We are not to be married for ages—not until Valentine has obtained a secure position in literature, and an income that seems almost impossible. That was the special condition upon which Mr. Sheldon—papa—gave his consent to our engagement. Of course it was very proper and prudent of him to think of these things; and as he has been very kind and liberal-minded in his conduct to me throughout, I should be a most ungrateful person if I refused to be guided by his advice."

"And I suppose that means that your engagement is to be a long one?"

"The longest of long engagements. And what can be happier than a long engagement? One gets to know and understand the man one is to marry so thoroughly. I think I know every turn of thought in Valentine's mind; every taste, every fancy; and I feel myself every day growing to think more and more like him. I read the books he reads, so as to be able to talk to him, you know; but I am not so clever as you, Di, and Valentine's favourite authors do sometimes seem rather dry to me. But I struggle on, you know; and the harder I find the struggle, the more I admire my dear love's cleverness. Think of him, Di—three different articles in three different magazines last month! The paper on Apollodorus, in the *Cheapside*, you know; and that story in the *Charing Cross*—'How I lost my Gingham

Umbrella, and gained the Acquaintance of Mr. Gozzleton.' *So* funny! And the exhaustive treatise on the Sources of Light, in the *Scientific Saturday*. And think of the fuss they make about Homer, a blind old person who wrote a long rigmarole of a poem about battles, and wrote it so badly that to this day no one knows whether it's one complete poem, or a lot of odds-and-ends in the way of poetry, put together by a man with an unpronounceable Greek name. When I think of what Valentine accomplishes in comparison to Homer, and the little notice the reviewers take of him, except to make him low-spirited by telling him that he is shallow and frivolous, I begin to think that literature must be going to the dogs."

And here Charlotte became meditative, absorbed in the contemplation of Mr. Hawkehurst's genius. Diana had begun the conversation very artfully, intending to proceed by a gentle transition from Charlotte's love affairs to her own; but the conversation was drifting away from the subject into a discussion upon literature, and the brilliant young essayist whose first adventurous flights seemed grand as the soaring of Theban eagle to this tender and admiring watcher of his skyward progress.

"Lotta," said Miss Paget, after a pause, "should you be very sorry if I were to leave you before your marriage?"

"Leave me before my marriage, Diana! Is it not arranged that you are to live with mamma, and be a daughter to her, when I am gone? And you will come and stay with Valentine and me at our cottage; and you will advise me about my housekeeping, and teach me how to be a sensible, useful, economical wife, as well as a devoted one. Leave us, Di! What have I done, or mamma, or Mr. Sheldon, or anybody, that you should talk of anything so dreadful?"

"What have you done, dear girl, dear friend, dear sister? Everything to win my undying love and gratitude. You have changed me from a hard disappointed bitter-minded woman—envious, at times, even of you—into your loving and devoted friend. You have changed me from a miserable creature into a contented and hopeful one. You have taught me to forget that my childhood and youth were one long night of wretchedness and degradation. You have taught me to forgive the father who suffered my life to be what it was, and made no one poor effort to lift me out of the slough of despond to which he had sunk. I can say no more, Charlotte. There are things that cannot be told by words."

"And you want to leave me!" said Charlotte, in accents half-wondering, half-reproachful.

"My father wants me to leave you, Lotta; and some one else—some one whom you must know and like before I can be sure I like him myself."

"Him!" cried Charlotte, with a faint shriek of surprise. "Diana, WHAT are you going to tell me?"

"A secret, Lotta; something which my father has forbidden me to tell any one, but which I will not hide from you. My poor father has found a kind friend—a friend who is almost as good to him as you are to me. How merciful Heaven is in raising up friends for outcasts! And I have seen a good deal of this gentleman who is so kind to papa, and the result is that—chiefly for papa's sake, and because I know that he is generous and brave and true, I mean papa's friend, M. Lenoble—I have consented to be his wife."

"Diana!" cried Charlotte, with a sternness of manner that was alarming in so gentle a creature, "it shall never be!"

"What dear?"

"The sacrifice! No, dear, no! I understand it all. For your cruel mercenary heartless desiging father's sake, you are going to marry a man whom you can't love. You are going to offer up your poor bruised desolate heart on the altar of duty. Ah, dear, you can't think I forget what you told me only two short months ago—though I seem selfish and frivolous, and am always talking about *him*, and parading my happiness, as it must seem to you, reckless of the wounds so newly healed in your noble unselfish heart. But I do not altogether forget, Diana, and such a sacrifice as this I will not allow. I know you have resigned him to me—I know you have thrust him from your heart, as you told me that night. But the hollow aching void that is left in your lonely heart shall be sacred, Di. No stranger's image shall pollute it. You shall not sacrifice your own peace to your father's selfishness. No, dear, no! With mamma and me you will always have a home. You need stoop to no cruel barter such as this marriage."

And hereupon Miss Halliday wept over and caressed her friend, as the confidante of Agamemnon's daughter may have wept over and caressed that devoted young princess after the divination of Calchas had become common talk in the royal household.

"But if I think it my duty to accept M. Lenoble's offer, Lotta?" urged Miss Paget with some embarrassment of manner. "M. Lenoble is as rich as he is generous, and my marriage with him will secure a happy home for my father. The foolish dreams I told you about on Christmas Eve had faded from my mind before I dared to speak of them. I could only confess my folly when I knew that I was learning to be wise. Pray do not think that I am sordid or mercenary. It is not because M. Lenoble is rich that I am inclined to marry him, it is because——"

"Because you want to throw yourself away for the advantage

of your selfish heartless father," interjected Charlotte. "He has neglected you all your life, and now wants to profit by the sacrifice of your happiness. Be firm, Di, darling; your Charlotte will stand by you, and find a home for you always, come what may. Who is this M. Lenoble? Some horrible ugly old creature, I dare say."

Miss Paget smiled and blushed. The vision of Gustave's frank handsome face arose before her very vividly as Charlotte said this.

"No, dear," she replied. "M. Lenoble is not an old man—five-and-thirty at most."

"Five-and-thirty!" repeated Charlotte, with a wry face; you don't call that *young?* And what is he like?"

"Well, dear, I think he is the sort of man whom most people would call handsome. I'm sure *you* would like him, Lotta. He is so candid, so animated, so full of strength and courage. The sort of man to whom one would naturally look in any emergency or danger; the sort of man in whose company fear would be impossible."

"Diana," cried Charlotte, suddenly, "you are in love with him!"

"Lotta!"

"Yes, dear, you are in love with him," repeated Miss Halliday, embracing her friend with effusion; "yes, over head and ears in love with him. And you are ashamed to confess the truth to me; and you are half ashamed to confess it even to yourself—as if you could deceive an old stager like me!" cried Charlotte, laughing. "Why, you dear inconstant thing, while I have felt myself the guiltiest and most selfish creature in the world for robbing you of Valentine, you have been quietly transferring your affections to this M. Gustave Lenoble—who is very rich, and brave, and true, and generous, and what most people would call handsome! Bless you, a thousand times, my darling! You have made me so happy!"

"Indeed, Lotta!"

"Yes, dear. The thought that there was a blank in your life made a dark cloud in mine. I know I have been very selfish, very thoughtless, but I could never have been quite free from a sense of self-reproach. But now there is nothing for me but happiness. O darling, I so long to see your M. Lenoble!"

"You shall see him, dear."

"And in the meantime tell me what he is like."

Miss Halliday insisted upon a full, true, and particular account of M. Lenoble's personal appearance. Diana gave it, but not without some sense of embarrassment. She could not bring herself to be enthusiastic about Gustave Lenoble, though in her heart there was a warmth of feeling that surprised her.

"What a hypocrite you are, Di!" exclaimed Charlotte presently. "I know you love this good Frenchman almost as dearly as I love Valentine, and that the thought of his affection makes you happy; and yet you speak of him in little measured sentences, and you won't be enthusiastic even about his good looks."

"It is difficult to pass from deams to realities, Lotta. I have lived so long among dreams, that the waking world seems strange to me."

"That is only a poetical way of saying that you are ashamed of having changed your mind. I will tell M. Lenoble what a lukewarm creature you are, and how unworthy of his love!"

"You shall tell him what you please. But remember, dear, my engagement must not be spoken about yet awhile, not even to your mamma. Papa makes a strong point of this, and I have promised to obey, though I am quite in the dark as to his reasons."

Miss Halliday submitted to anything her friend wished; only entreating that she might be introduced to M. Lenoble. Diana promised her this privilege; but it speedily transpired that Diana's promise was not all that was wanted on this occasion.

For some time past, in fact from the very commencement of Charlotte's engagement, Mr. Sheldon had shown himself punctilious to an exceeding degree with regard to his stepdaughter. The places to which she went, and the people with whom she consorted, appeared to be matters of supreme importance in his mind. When speaking of these things he gave those about him to understand that his ideas had been the same from the time of Charlotte's leaving school; but Diana knew that this was not true. Mr. Sheldon's theories had been much less strict, and Mr. Sheldon's practice had been much more careless, prior to Miss Halliday's engagement.

No stately principal of a school for young ladies could have been more particular as to the movements of her charges—more apprehensive of wolf-in-sheep's-clothing in the shape of singing or drawing-master—than Mr. Sheldon seemed to be in these latter days. Even those pleasant walks in Kensington Gardens, which had been one of the regular occupations of the day, were now forbidden. Mr. Sheldon did not like that his daughter should walk in public with no better protector than Diana Paget.

"There is something disreputable in two girls marching about those gardens together according to my ideas," said this ultra-refined stockbroker, one morning at the family breakfast-table. "I don't like to see my stepdaughter do anything I should forbid my own daughter to do. And if I had a daughter, I should most decidedly forbid all lonely rambles in Kensington

Gardens. You see, Lotta, two girls as attractive as you and Miss Paget can't be too particular where you go, and what you do. When you want air and exercise, you can get both in the garden; and when you want change of scene, and a peep at the fashions, you can drive out with Mrs. Sheldon."

To this deprivation Charlotte submitted, somewhat unwillingly, but with no sign of open rebellion. She thought her stepfather foolish and unreasonable; but she always bore in mind the fact that he had been kind and disinterested in the matter of her engagement, and she was content to prove her gratitude by any little sacrifice of this kind. Was not her lover permitted to spend his Sundays in her society, and to call on her, at his discretion, during the week? And what were walks in Kensington Gardens compared with the delight of his dear presence! It is true that she had sometimes been favoured with Mr. Hawkehurst's society in the course of her airing; but she knew that he sacrificed his hours of work or study for the chance of half an hour in her society; and she felt that there might be gain to him in her loss of liberty.

She told him, when next they met, that the morning walks were forbidden; and, so jealous a passion is love, that Mr. Hawkehurst was nowise sorry to find that his pearl was strictly watched and carefully guarded.

"Well, it seems very particular of Mr. Sheldon, of course," he said; "but, upon my word, I think he's right. Such a girl as you oughtn't to go about with no better protection than Diana can give you. Fellows will stare so at a pretty girl, you know; and I can't bear to think my pearl should be stared at by impertinent strangers."

Mr. Hawkehurst did not, however, find the strict notions of his lady-love's stepfather quite so agreeable when he wanted to take his "pearl" to the winter exhibitions of pictures. He was told that Miss Halliday could go nowhere, except accompanied by her mamma; and as Georgy did not care about pictures, and found herself unequal to the fatigue of attending the winter exhibitions, he was obliged to forego the delight of seeing them with Lotta on his arm. He pronounced Mr. Sheldon on this occasion to be a narrow-minded idiot; but withdrew the remark in a contrite spirit when Charlotte reminded him of that gentleman's generosity.

"Yes, dear, he has certainly been very kind and very disinterested—more disinterested than even you think; but, somehow, I can't make him out."

It was very well for Miss Halliday that she had submitted to this novel restriction with so good a grace, inasmuch as Mr. Sheldon had prepared himself for active opposition. He had given orders to his wife, and further orders to Mrs. Woolner, to

the effect that his step-daughter should not be permitted to go out of doors, except in his own or her mother's company.

"She is a very good girl, you see, Nancy," he said to the old housekeeper, "but she's young, and she's giddy; and of course I can't take upon myself to answer for Miss Paget, who may or may not be a good girl. She comes of a very bad stock, however; and I am bound to remember that. Some people think that you can't give a girl too much liberty. My ideas lean the other way. I think you can't take too much care of a very pretty girl whom you are bound by duty to protect.

All this sounded very noble and very conscientious. It sounded thus even to Mrs. Woolper, who in her intercourse with Philip Sheldon could never quite divest herself of one appalling memory. That memory was the death of Tom Halliday, and the horrible thoughts and fears that had for a time possessed her mind in relation to that death. The shadow of that old ghastly terror sometimes came between her and Mr. Sheldon, even now, though she had long ago assured herself that the terror had been alike groundless and unreasonable.

"Didn't I see my own nephew carried off by a fever twice as sudden as the fever that carried off poor Mr. Halliday?" she said to herself; "and am I to think horrid things of him as I nursed a baby, because a cup of greasy beef-tea turned my stomach?"

Convinced by such reasoning as this that she had done her master a grievous wrong, and grateful for the timely shelter afforded in her old age, Mrs. Woolper felt that she could not do too much in her benefactor's service. She had already shown herself a clever managing housekeeper; had reformed abuses, and introduced a new system of care and economy below-stairs, to the utter bewilderment of poor Georgy, for whom the responsibilities of the gothic villa had been an overwhelming burden. Georgy was not particularly grateful to the energetic old Yorkshirewoman who had taken this burden off her hands, but she was submissive.

"I never felt myself much in the house, my dear," she said to Lotta; "but I am sure since Ann Woolper has been here I have felt myself a cipher."

Mrs. Woolper, naturally sharp and observant, was not slow to perceive that Mr. Sheldon was abnormally anxious about his stepdaughter. She ascribed this anxiety to a suspicious nature, an inherent distrust of other people on the part of her master, and in some measure to his ignorance of womankind.

"He seems to think that she'd run away and get married on the sly, at a word from that young man; but he doesn't know what a dear innocent soul she is, and how sorry she'd be to displease any one that's kind to her. I don't know anything about Miss Paget. She's more stand-offish than our own Miss, though

she is little better than a genteel kind of servant; but she seems fair-spoken enough. As to our Miss, bless her dear heart! she want's no watching, I'll lay. But I daresay those City folks, with their stocks going up and going down, and always bringing about the ruin of somebody or other, go which way they will, get their poor heads so muddled with figures that they can't believe there's such a thing as honesty in the world."

This was the gist of Mrs. Woolper's evening musing in the snug little housekeeper's room at the Lawn. It was a very comfortable little room, and held sacred to Mrs. Woolper; the three young females, and the boy in buttons, who formed Mr. Sheldon's in-door establishment, preferring the license of the kitchen to the strict etiquette of the housekeeper's room.

This apartment, as well as every other room in the stock-broker's house, bore the stamp of prosperity. A comfortable easy-chair reposed the limbs of Mrs. Woolper; a bright little fire burned in a bright little grate, and its ruddy light was reflected in a bright little fender. Prints of the goody class adorned the walls; and a small round table, with a somewhat gaudy cover, supported Mrs. Woolper's work-box and family Bible, both of which she made it a point of honour to carry about with her, and to keep religiously, through good fortune and through evil fortune; neither of which, however, afforded her much employment. She felt herself to be much nearer grace with the family Bible by her side than she would have been without it; she felt, indeed, that the maintenance and due exhibition of the family Bible was in itself a kind of religion. But that she should peruse its pages was not in the bond. Her eyes were old and weak—sharp enough to discover the short-comings of Mr. Sheldon's young maid-servants, but too feeble even for long-primer.

As she looked round that snug little chamber of an evening, when her day's labours were ended, and her own particular Britannia-metal tea-pot was basking in the fender, her own special round of toast frizzling on the trivet, she was very grateful to the man to whom she owed these comforts.

"What should I be but for him?" she asked herself with a shudder; for the vision of that darksome abode shut in by high black walls—the metropolitan workhouse—arose before her. She did not know what difficulties would have barred her entrance even to that dreary asylum; she only thought of the horrors of that sanctuary, and she blessed her master for the benevolence that had accepted the service of her failing hands.

This was the servant on whom Philip Sheldon relied. He saw that she was grateful, and that she was ready to serve him with an almost slavish devotion. He knew that she had sus-

pected him in the past, and he saw that she had outlived her suspicion.

"There is a statute of limitations to these things as well as for debt," he said to himself. "A man can live down anything, if he knows what he is about."

CHAPTER II.

FIRM AS A ROCK.

After that midnight interview between the two girls in Miss Halliday's bedroom, life went very smoothly at the gothic villa for two or three days, during which the impulsive Charlotte, being forbidden to talk openly of the change in her friend's position, was fain to give vent to her feelings by furtive embraces and hand-squeezings, sly nods and meaning becks, and mischievous twinkling of her arch grey eyes.

She talked of Valentine more than ever now, feeling herself at liberty to sing what pæans she pleased in praise of her hero, now that her friend had also a fitting subject for pæans.

"And now it's your turn to talk of M. Lenoble, dear," she would say naïvely, when she had entertained Diana with the minute details of her last conversation with her lover, or a lively sketch of the delights of that ideal cottage which she loved to furnish and unfurnish in accordance with the new fancy of the hour.

Diana was pleased to listen to her girlish talk: to hang and rehang the ideal draperies, to fill and refill the ideal bookcase, to plan and replan the arrangements of that ideal existence which was to be all joy and love and harmony; but when her turn came, and she was asked to be rapturous about her own lover, she could say nothing: that which she felt was too deep for words. The thought of her lover was strange to her; the fact of his love was mysterious and wonderful. She could not talk of him with the customary frivolous school-girl talk; and love for him had so newly taken root in her heart that there were as yet no blossoms to be gathered from that magical plant.

"Don't ask me to talk of him, Lotta, dear;" she said. "I am not yet sure that I love him; I only feel that it is sweet to be loved by him. I think Providence must have sent him to me in pity for my desolation."

This was almost the same fancy that had occurred to Susan Meynell five-and-thirty years before this time, when Gustave the first had rescued her from the suicide's unrepentable sin.

That chivalrous turn of mind which was hereditary in the race of Lenoble predisposed these men to pity loneliness and beauty, weakness and sorrow. This pity for helplessness may

have been indeed only an element of their exceeding strength. Was not the rescue of weaklings and women an unfailing attribute in the mighty men of old? Who so prompt as Hercules to fly to the rescue of Hesione? who so swift as Perseus to save Andromeda? And what sea-monster more terrible than loneliness and poverty?

In a few days there came another letter from Captain Paget, containing a fresh summons to Omega Street.

"Lenoble positively returns to Normandy to-morrow," he wrote, "to see his girls, and, no doubt, break the news of his approaching marriage. He much wants to see you, and, as I have forbidden his calling on you at the Lawn, can only meet you here. He is to drink tea with me at the usual time to-morrow evening, and I shall expect to see you early in the afternoon."

This afforded an opportunity for that introduction to which Miss Halliday looked forward with so much interest.

"If Mr. Sheldon and your mamma will let you come with me this afternoon, dear, I shall be very pleased to take you," said Diana; and she felt that she would appear less in the character of a lamb led to the slaughter if she could go to meet her betrothed accompanied by Charlotte.

But in this matter both the young ladies were doomed to disappointment. Mr. Sheldon showed himself a social Draco in all things relating to his stepdaughter. Being forbidden to reveal the existence of Gustave Lenoble, Charlotte could only urge a frivilous desire to accompany her friend in a pilgrimage dictated by filial duty. To the practical mind of Philip Sheldon this desire appeared altogether absurd and unreasonable, and he did not hesitate to express himself to that effect in a *tête-à-tête* with his stepdaughter.

"What good on earth can you do by going to see a gouty old man, who has his own daughter to dance attendance upon him?" asked Mr. Sheldon. "Really, Charlotte, I am surprised to hear such a proposition from a girl of your good sense. Miss Paget is your companion, not your visitor. It is her duty to indulge your whims, but it is not your place to give way to hers."

"But this is a whim of mine, papa; I should really like to spend the afternoon at Chelsea. It would be a change, you know."

Mr. Sheldon looked at his stepdaughter with a sharp and searching gaze, a gaze in which there was suspicion as well as curiosity.

"It is a very discreditable whim for a young lady in your position," he said sternly; "and I beg that such a proposition may not be made to me again."

This was decisive. Charlotte submitted, and Diana went alone to Omega Street. She found Gustave waiting for her. He proposed a walk, and Captain Paget was enthusiastic upon the subject of fresh air, and the benefits arising therefrom. So the lovers went out in the bleak winter afternoon, and wandered in the dreary Pimlico region as far as St. James's Park—Gustave delighted to have Diana's hand upon his arm, and Diana almost bewildered by a sense of happiness, which seemed unreal by reason of its very novelty.

Gustave was all enthusiasm, full of plans for the future. He would have had the marriage take place immediately, if such a thing had been possible; but Diana showed him that it would not be possible. Her first duty was to the only friends she had ever known. Gustave argued the point resolutely for nearly an hour, during which time they made their way to the very gates of St. James's Park, but Diana was more resolute still.

"What a tyrannical wife I shall have by and by!" said Gustave. "I think you care for these Sheldons more than for me, Diane."

"These Sheldons have been so good to me in the past."

"And I mean to be so good to you in the future," answered Gustave. "You shall be the happiest wife in Normandy, if a foolish doting husband's devotion can make you happy."

"What have I done to deserve so much devotion?" Diana murmured wonderingly.

"What have you done? Nothing, less than nothing. You will not even run the hazard of offending your family of Sheldon in order to make me happy. But Fate has said, 'At the feet of that girl with the dark eyes and pale proud face shall poor Lenoble of Côtenoir put down his heart.' Do you know what I said to myself when I saw you first in the little parlour yonder? Ah, no! How should you guess? 'She is there,' said I; 'behold her! It is thy destiny, Lenoble, on which thou gazest!' And thou, love, wert calm and voiceless as Fate. Quiet as the goddess of marble before which the pagans offered their sacrifices, across whose cold knees they laid their rich garments. I put my treasures in your lap, my love; my heart, my hopes,—all the treasures I had to offer."

This was all very sweet, but there was a sting even mingled with that sweetness. Diana told herself that love like this should only be offered on the purest shrine; and when she remembered the many stains upon her father's honour, it seemed to her that a part of the shame must needs cleave to her.

"Gustave," she said presently, after an absent meditative mood, from which her lover had vainly tried to beguile her, "does it not seem to you that there is something foolish in this

talk of love and confidence between you and me; and that all your promises have been a little too lightly made? What do you know of me? You see me sitting in my father's room, and because my eyes happen to please you, or for some reason as foolish as that, you ask me to be your wife. I might have been one of the worst of women."

"You might have been?—yes, dear, but you are not. And if you had been, Gustave Lenoble would not have flung his heart into your lap, even if your eyes had been sweeter than they are. We impulsive people are people of quick perceptions, and know what we are doing better than our reflective friends imagine. I did not need to be an hour in your company, dear love, in order to know that you are noble and true. There are tones in the voice, there are expressions of the face, that tell these things better than words can tell them; for, you see, words can lie, while tones and looks are apt to be true. Yes, my angel, I knew you from that first night. My heart leapt across all conventional barriers, and found its way straight to yours."

"I can see that you think much better of me than I deserve; but even supposing you not to be deceived as to myself, I fear you are much deceived as to my surroundings."

"I know that your father is poor, and that the burden of his poverty weighs heavily on you. That is enough for me to know."

"No, M. Lenoble; it is not enough for you to know. If I am to be your wife, I will not enter your family as an impostor. I told you the truth about myself the other day when you questioned me, and I am bound to tell you the truth about my father."

And then she told him, in the plainest frankest language, the story of her father's life. She inflicted no unnecessary shame on Captain Paget; she made no complaint of her neglected childhood and joyless youth; but she told Gustave that her father had been an adventurer, keeping doubtful company, and earning his bread by doubtful means.

"I hope and believe that if a peaceful home could be secured for his declining years, he would live the rest of his life like a gentleman and a Christian; and that, the bitter struggle for existence being ended, he would be sorry for the past. I doubt if the sense of shame ever deserted him when he was living that wretched wandering life, leaving debts and difficulties behind him everywhere—always harassed and hunted by creditors, who had good cause to be angry. Yes, Gustave, I do believe that if it should please Providence to give my father a peaceful home at last, he will be thankful for God's mercy, and will repent the sins of life. And now I have told you the kind of heritage I can bring my husband."

"My dear love, I will accept the heritage, for the sake of her who brings it. I never meant to be less than a son to your father; and if he is not the best of fathers, as regards the past, we will try to make him a decent kind of father as regards the future. I have long understood that Captain Paget is something—ever so little—of an adventurer. It was the pursuit of fortune that brought him to me; and without knowing it, he brought me my fortune in the shape of his daughter."

Diana blushed as she remembered that Captain Paget had not been so innocent of any design in this matter as the Frenchman imagined.

"And you will receive even papa for my sake?" asked Diana.

"With all my heart."

"Ah, you are indeed a generous lover!"

"A lover who is not generous is—bah! there is nothing in creation so mean as the wretch whom love does not render generous. When one sees the woman whom Fate intends for one's wife, is one to stop to inquire the character of her father, her mother, her sister, her cousin?—for there is no stopping when you begin that. A man who loves makes no inquiries. If he finds his jewel in the gutter, he picks it out of the mud and carries it away in his bosom, too proud of his treasure to remember where he found it; always provided that the jewel is no counterfeit, but the real gem, fit for a king's crown. And my diamond is of the purest water. By and by we will try to drain the gutter—that is to say, we will try to pay those small debts of which you speak, to lodging-house keepers, and tradesmen who have trusted your father."

"You would pay papa's debts!" cried Diana in amazement.

"But why not? All these little debts, the thought of which is so bitter to you, might be discharged for two or three thousand pounds. Your father tells me I am to be very rich by and by."

"My father tells you! Ah, then, you have allowed him to involve you in some kind of speculation!"

"He has involved me in no speculation, and in no risk that two or three hundred pounds will not cover."

"The whole business seems very mysterious, Gustave."

"Perhaps; it has to do with a secret which I am pledged to keep. I will not allow your father to lead me into any quagmire of speculation, believe me, dear one."

After this they went back to Omega Street in the winter gloaming, and Diana loved and admired this man with all her heart and mind. A new life lay before her, very bright and fair. There, where had been only the barren desert, was now a fair landscape, shining in the sunlight of hope.

"Do you think your children will ever love me, Gustave?"

she asked, not without some sense of wonder that this impulsive light-hearted lover should be the owner of children. She fancied that a responsibility so grave as paternity must needs have impressed some stamp of solemnity upon the man who bore it.

"Ever love thee!" cried Gustave. "Child, they will adore thee. They ask only some one to love. Their hearts are gardens of flowers; and thou shalt gather the flowers. But wilt thou be happy at Côtenoir, thou? It is somewhat sad, perhaps—the grave old château with the long sombre corridors. But thou shalt choose new furniture, new garnitures at Rouen, and we will make all bright and gay, like the heart of thy affianced Thou wilt not be dull?"

"Dull, with you and yours! I shall thank God for my happy home day and night, as I never thought to thank Him a a few months ago, when I was dissatisfied, wicked, tired of my life."

"And when you thought of that other one? Ah, how he was an imbecile, that other one! But thou wilt never think of him again; it is a dream that is past," said M. Lenoble.

That self-confidence which was an attribute of his sanguine nature rendered the idea of a rival not altogether unpleasant to him. He was gratified by the idea of his own victory, and the base rival's annihilation.

"Diane, I want to show thee the home that is to be thine," he said presently. "Your Sheldon family must give thee at least a holiday, if they refuse to let thee go altogether. Thou wilt come to Normandy with thy father. He is coming for a week or two, now that his gout is better. I want to show thee Côtenoir—and Beaubocage, the place where my father was born. It will seem dreary, perhaps, to thine English eyes; but to me it is very dear."

"Nothing that is dear to you shall appear dreary to me," said Diana.

By this time they had arrived at Omega Street. Again Miss Paget made tea for her lover. Strange to say, the operation seemed to grow more agreeable with every repetition. While taking his tea from the hands of his beloved, Gustave pressed the question of Diana's visit to Normandy.

"About her Sheldon family she is adamant," he said to Captain Paget, who sipped his tea and smiled at the lovers with the air of an aristocratic patriarch. "There is to be no marriage till it pleases Mrs. Sheldon to set her free. I consent to this only as man must consent to the inevitable; but I say to her, can she not come to Normandy for a fortnight—say but one short fortnight—to see her home? She will come with you. She has but to ask a holiday of her friends, and it is done."

"Of course," exclaimed the Captain, "she shall come with me. If necessary, I myself will ask it of Sheldon.—But it will be best not to mention where you are going, Diana. There are reasons, best known to our friend Gustave and myself, which render secrecy advisable just at present. You can say Rouen. That is quite near enough to the mark to come within the limits of truth," added Horatio, with the tone of a man who had never quite outstepped those limits. "Yes, Rouen. And you will come with me."

"With us," said Gustave. "I will put off my journey for a day or two for the sake of going with you. You have to meet Fleurus in Rouen haven't you?"

"Yes; he is to be there on the fifth of March, and this is the last day of February. I had a letter from him this morning. All goes swimmingly.

Diana wondered what it could be which went swimmingly; but she was obliged to content herself with her lover's assurance that he had not allowed her father to involve him in any kind of speculation.

CHAPTER III.

AGAINST WIND AND TIDE.

Between Philip Sheldon and his brother there was at this time a state of feeling somewhat akin to the relations between a subjugated country and its conqueror. The vanquished is fain to accept whatever the victor is pleased to give, though discontent and impotent rage may be gnawing his entrails. George Sheldon had been a loser in that game in which the Haygarthian inheritance was the stake. He had held good cards, and had played them with considerable cleverness; but no play could prevail against his antagonist's ace of trumps. The ace of trumps was Charlotte Halliday; and as to his mode and matter of playing this card, Mr. Sheldon was for the present profoundly mysterious.

"I have known a good many inscrutable cards in my time," the solicitor of Gray's Inn observed to his elder brother, in the course of fraternal converse; "but I think for inscrutability you put the topper on the lot. What do you expect to get out of this Haygarth estate? Come, Phil, let us have your figures in plain English. I am to have a fifth—that's all signed and sealed. But how about your share? What agreement have you got from Miss Halliday?"

"None."

"None!"

"What would the world think of me if I extorted money, or

the promise of money, from my wife's daughter? Do you think I could enforce any deed between her and me?"

"Ah, I see; you go in for respectability. And you are going to leave the settlement of your claims to your stepdaughter's generosity. You will let her marry Hawkehurst, with her hundred thousand pounds; and then you will say to those two, 'Mr. and Mrs. Hawkehurst, be so kind as to hand over my share of the plunder.' That is not *like* you, Phil."

"Perhaps you will be good enough to spare yourself the trouble of speculating about my motives. Go your way, and leave me to go mine."

"But this is a case in which I have an interest. If Charlotte marries Hawkehurst, I don't see how you are to profit, to any extent that you would care about, by the Haygarth fortune. But, on the other hand, if she should die unmarried, without a will, the money would go to your wife. O my God! Philip Sheldon, is THAT what you mean?"

The question was so sudden, the tone of horror in which it was spoken so undisguised, that Mr. Sheldon the stockbroker was for one moment thrown off his guard. His breath thickened; he tried to speak, but his dry lips could shape no word. It was only one moment that he faltered. In the next he turned upon his brother angrily, and asked what he meant.

"You've been promised *your* reward," he said; "leave me to look after mine. You'll take those papers round to Greenwood and Greenwood; they want to talk to you about them."

"Yes, I'll take the papers."

Greenwood and Greenwood were Mr. Sheldon's own solicitors —a firm of some distinction, on whose acumen and experience the stockbroker placed implicit reliance. They were men of unblemished respectability, and to them Mr. Sheldon had confided the care of his stepdaughter's interests, always reserving the chief power in his own hands. These gentlemen thought well of the young lady's prospects, and were handling the case in that slow and stately manner which marks the handling of such cases by eminent firms of the slow-and-stately class.

Mr. Sheldon wished his brother good-day, and was about to depart, when George planted himself suddenly before the door.

"Look you here, Phil," he said, with an intensity of manner that was by no means common to him; "I want to say a few words to you, and I will say them. There was an occasion, ten years ago, on which I ought to have spoken out, and didn't. I have never ceased to regret my cowardice. Yes, by Jove! I hate myself for it; and there are times when I feel as if my share in that wretched business was almost as bad as yours."

"I don't know what you mean."

"Of course not. That's your text, and you'll stick to it. But you *do* know what I mean, and you shall know what I mean, if plain words can tell you. You and I had a friend, Phil. He was a good friend to me, and I liked him as much as a man of the world can afford to like anybody. If I had been down in the world, and had asked him for a hundred pounds to give me a new start in life, I think he'd have said, 'George, here's a cheque for you.' *That's* my notion of a friend. And yet I stood by that man's deathbed, and saw him sinking, and knew what ailed him, and didn't stretch out my hand to save him."

"Be so good as to move away from that door," said Mr. Sheldon, livid to the lips with smothered fury, but able to put on a bold front nevertheless. "I didn't come here to listen to rhodomontade of this kind, or to bandy words with you. Get out of my way."

"Not till I've said my say. There shall be no rhodomontade this time. I stood by and saw my best friend murdered—by you. I kept my counsel for your sake, and when you had made your fortune—by his death—I asked you for a little money. You know how much you gave me, and how graciously you gave it. If you had given me twenty times the sum you gained by Tom Halliday's death, I would give it back, and twenty times as much again, to bring him back to life, and to feel that I had never aided and abetted a murderer. Yes, by God, I would! though I'm not straitlaced or over-scrupulous at the best of times. But that's past, and all the money in the Bank of England wouldn't undo what you did in Fitzgeorge Street. But if you try on any such tricks with Tom Halliday's daughter, if *that's* the scheme you've hatched for getting hold of this money, as surely as we two live, I'll let in the light upon your doings, and save the girl whose father you murdered. I will, Philip, let come what may. You can't get *me* out of the way when it suits you, you see. *I know you.* That's the best antidote against your medicines."

"If you'll be so good as to say these things on 'Change, I can bring an action for libel, or get you put into a madhouse. There's no good in saying them here."

Philip Sheldon, even in this crisis, was less agitated that his brother, being of a harder nature, and less subject to random impulses of good or evil. He caught his accuser by the collar of his coat, and flung him violently from the doorway. Thus ended his visit to Gray's Inn.

Boldly as he had borne himself during the interview, he went to his office profoundly depressed and dispirited.

"So I am to have him against me?" he said to himself.

"He can do me no real harm; but he can harass and annoy me. If he should drop any hint to Hawkehurst?—but he'll scarcely do that. Perhaps I've ridden him a little too roughly in the past. And yet if I'd been smoother, where would his demands have ended? No; concession in these cases means ruin."

He shut himself in his office, and sat down to his desk to confront his difficulties. For a long time the bark which was freighted with Philip Sheldon's fortunes had been sailing in troubled waters. He had been an unconscious disciple of Lord Bacon, inasmuch as the boldness inculcated by that philosopher had been the distinguishing characteristic of his conduct in all the operations of life. As a speculator, his boldness had served him well. Adventures from which timid spirits shrunk appalled had brought golden harvests to this daring gamester. When some rich argosy upon the commercial ocean fired her minute-guns, and sent up signals of distress, menaced by the furious tempest, lifted high on the crest of mountainous waves, below which, black and fathomless, yawn the valleys of death,—a frail ark hovering above the ravening jaws of all-devouring Poseidon, —Philip Sheldon was among that chosen band of desperate wreckers who dared to face the storm, and profit by the tempest and terror. From such argosies, while other men watched and waited for a gleam of sunlight on the dark horizon, Mr. Sheldon had obtained for himself goodly merchandise. The debentures of railways that were in bad odour; Unitas Bank shares, immediately after the discovery of gigantic embezzlements by Swillenger, the Unitas-Bank secretary; the Mole-and-Burrow railway stock, when the Mole-and-Burrow scheme was as yet in the clouds, and the wiseacres prognosticated its failure; the shares in foreign loans, which the Rothschilds were buying *sub rosa*;—these, and such as these, had employed Mr. Sheldon's capital; and from the skilful manipulation of capital thus employed, Mr. Sheldon had trebled the fortune secured by his alliance with Tom Halliday's widow.

It had been the stockbroker's fate to enter the money market at a time when fortunes were acquired with an abnormal facility. He had made the most of his advantages, and neglected none of his opportunities. He had seized Good Fortune by the forelock, and not waited to find the harridan's bald and slippery crown turned to him in pitiless derision. He had made only one mistake—and that he made in common with many of his fellow-players in the great game of speculation always going on eastward of Temple Bar—he had mistaken the abnormal for the normal: he had imagined that these splendid opportunities were the natural evolvements of an endless sequence of every-day events; and when the sequence was abruptly broken, and when the last of the seven fat kine vanished off the transitory

scene of life, to make way for a dismal succession of lean kine, there was no sanguine youngster newly admitted to the sacred privileges of "The House" more astounded by the change than Mr. Sheldon.

The panic came like a thief in the night, and it found Mr. Sheldon a speculator for the rise. The Melampuses and Amphiaräuses of the Stock Exchange had agreed in declaring that a man who bought into consols at 90 *must* see his capital increased; and what was true of this chief among securities was of course true of other securities. The panic came, and from 90, consols declined dismally, slowly, hopelessly, to 85½; securities less secure sank with a rapidity corresponding with their constitutional weakness. As during the ravages of an epidemic the weaker are first to fall victims to the destroyer, so while this fever raged on 'Change, the feeble enterprises, the "risky" transactions, sank at an appalling rate, some to total expiry. The man who holds a roaring lion by the tail could scarcely be worse off than the speculator in these troublous times. To let go is immediate loss, to hold on for a certain time might be redemption, could one but know the exact moment in which it would be wise to let go. But to hold on until the beast grows more and more furious, and then to let go and be eaten up alive, is what many men did in that awful crisis.

If Philip Sheldon had accepted his first loss, and been warned by the first indication that marked the turning of the tide, he would have been a considerable loser; but he would not accept his loss, and he would not be warned by that early indication. He had implicit belief in his own cleverness; and he fancied if every other bark in that tempest-tossed ocean foundered and sank, his boat might ride triumphantly across the harbour-bar, secure by virtue of his science and daring as a navigator. It was not till he had seen a small fortune melt away in the payment of contango, that he consented to the inevitable. The mistakes of one year devoured the fruits of nine years' successful enterprise, and the Philip Sheldon of this present year was no richer than the man who had stood by Tom Halliday's bedside and waited the advent of the equal foot that knows no difference between the threshold of kingly palace or pauper refuge. Not only did he find himself as poor a man as in that hateful stage of his existence—to remember which was a dull dead pain even to *him*—but a man infinitely more heavily burdened. He had made for himself a certain position, and the fall from that must needs be a cruel and damaging fall, the utter annihilation of all his chances in life.

The stockbroker's fitful slumbers at this time began to be haunted by the vision of a black board fixed against the wall of a place of public resort, a black board on which appeared his

own name. In what strange places feverish dreams showed him this hideous square of painted deal!—Now it was on the walls of the rooms he lived in; now on the door of a church, like Luther's propositions; now at a street-corner, where should have been the name of the street; now inky-black against the fair white headstone of his own grave. Miserable dream, miserable man, for whom the scraping together of sordid dross was life's only object, and who, in losing money, lost all!

This agonizing consciousness of loss and of close-impending disgrace was the wolf which this Spartan stockbroker concealed beneath his waistcoat day after day, while the dull common, joyless course of his existence went on; and his shallow wife smiled at him from the opposite side of his hearth, more interested in a new stitch for her crotchet or berlin-wool work than by the inner life of her husband; and Charlotte and her lover contemplated existence from their own point of view, and cherished their own dreams and their own hopes, and were, in all things, as far away from the moody meditator as if they had been natives of Upper India.

The ruin which impended over the unlucky speculator was not immediate, but it was not far off; the shadow of it already wrapped him in a twilight obscurity. His repute as a clever and a safe man had left him. He was described now as a daring man; and the wiseacres shook their heads as they talked of him.

"One of the next to go will be Sheldon," said the wiseacres; but in these days of commercial epidemic there was no saying who would be the first to go. It was the end of the world in little. One was taken, and another left. The *Gazette* overran its customary column like a swollen river, and flooded a whole page of the *Times* newspaper; and men looked to the lists of names in the Wednesday and Saturday papers as to the trump of archangels sounding the destruction of the universe.

For some time the bark in which Mr. Sheldon had breasted those turbulent waters had been made of paper. This was nothing. Paper boats were the prevailing shipping in those waters; but Captain Sheldon's bark needed refitting, and the captain feared a scarcity of paper, or, worse still, the awful edict issued from some commercial Areopagus that for him there should be no more paper.

Once before, Mr. Sheldon had found himself face to face with ruin complete and irredeemable. When all common expedients had been exhausted, and his embarrassments had become desperate, he had found a desperate expedient, and had extricated himself from those embarrassments. The time had come in which a new means of extrication must be found as desperate as the last, if need were. As Philip Sheldon

had faced the situation before, he faced it now—unshrinkingly, though with a gloomy anger against destiny. It was hard for him that such a thing should have to be repeated If he pitied anybody, he pitied himself; and this kind of compassion is very common with this kind of character. Do not the Casket letters show us—if we may trust them to show us anything—that Mary Stuart was very sorry for herself when she found herself called upon to make an end of Darnley? In Mr. Swinburne's wonderful study in morbid anatomy, there are perhaps no finer touches than those which reveal the Queen's selfish compassion for her own heartlessness.

CHAPTER IV.

DIANA ASKS FOR A HOLIDAY.

DIANA informed Mrs. Sheldon of her father's wish that she should leave Bayswater. Before doing this, she had obtained the Captain's consent to the revelation of her engagement to be married.

"I don't like to leave them in a mysterious manner, papa," she said. "I have told Charlotte a good deal already, under a promise of secrecy; but I should like to tell Mrs. Sheldon that there is a real reason for my leaviug her."

"Very well, my love, since you are so amazingly squeam—honourable," interposed the Captain, remembering how much depended on his daughter's marriage, and what a very difficult person he had found her. "Yes, my dear, of course; I respect your honourable feeling; and—er—yes—you *may* tell Mrs. Sheldon—and that of course includes Mr. Sheldon, since the lady is but an inoffensive cipher—that you are about to be married—to a French gentleman of position. You will, of course, be obliged to mention his name, and then will arise the question as to where and how you met him; and, upon my word, it's confoundedly awkward that you should insist on enlightening these people. You see, my dear girl, what I want to avoid, for the present, is any chance of collision between the Sheldons and Lenoble."

"Papa!" exclaimed Diana, impatiently, "why *must* there be all this scheming?"

"O, very well, Miss Paget; tell them what you like!" cried the Captain, aggravated beyond endurance by such inherent perversity. "All I can say is, that a young woman who quarrels with her bread-and-butter is likely to come to dry bread; and very little of that, perhaps. I wash my hands of the business. Tell them what you like."

"I will not tell them more than I feel to be actually neces-

sary, papa," the young lady replied calmly. I do not think Mr. Sheldon will trouble himself about M. Lenoble. He seems very much occupied by his own affairs."

"Humph! Sheldon seems harassed, anxious, does he?"

"Well, yes, papa; I have thought so for the last few months. If I may venture to judge by the expression of his face, as he sits at home in the evening, reading the paper, or staring at the fire, I am sure he has many anxieties—troubles even. Mrs. Sheldon and Charlotte do not appear to notice these things. They are accustomed to see him quiet and reserved, and they don't perceive the change in him as I do.".

"O, there is a change, is there?"

"Yes, a decided change."

"Why the deuce couldn't you tell me this before!"

"Why should I tell you that Mr. Sheldon seems anxious? I should not have told you now, if you had not appeared to dread his interference in our affairs. I can't help observing these things; but I don't want to play the part of a spy."

"No, you're so infernally punct—so delicate-minded, my love," said the Captain, pulling himself up suddenly, for the second time. "Forgive me if I was impatient just now. You look at these things from a higher point of view than that of a battered old man of the world like me. But if you should see anything remarkable in Mr. Sheldon's conduct on another occasion, my love, I should be obliged to you if you would be more communicative. He and I have been allied in business, you see, and it is important for me to know these things."

"I have not seen anything remarkable in Mr. Sheldon's conduct, papa; I have only seen him thoughtful and dispirited. And I suppose anxieties are common to every man of business."

Georgy received Miss Paget's announcement with mingled lamentations and congratulations.

"I am sure I am heartily glad for your sake, Diana," she said; "but what we shall do without you, I don't know. Who is to see to the drawing-room being dusted every morning, when you are gone? I'm sure I tremble for the glass shades. Don't imagine I'm not pleased to think you should settle in life advantageously, my love. I'm not so selfish as that; though I will say that there never was a girl with more natural talent for making-up pretty little capes than you. The one I have on has been admired by everybody. Even Ann Woolper this morning, when I was going into the butcher's book with her—for I insist upon going into the butcher's book with her weekly, whether she likes it or not; though the way that man puts down the items is so bewildering that I feel myself a perfect baby in her hands,—even Ann admired it, and said how young-looking it is. And then she brought up the time in Fitzgeorge Street, and

poor Tom's illness, and almost upset me for the rest of the day. And now, dear, let me offer you my sincere congratulations. Of course, you know that you would always have had a home with me; but service, or at least companionship, is no inheritance, as the proverb says; and for your own sake I'm very glad to think that you are going to have a house of your own. And now tell me what he is like, Monsieur what's-his-name?"

Mrs. Sheldon had been told, but had not remembered the name. Her great anxiety, as well as Charlotte's, was to know what manner of man the affianced lover was. If Diana's future happiness had been contingent on the shape of her husband's nose, or the colour of his eyes, these two ladies could not have been more anxious upon the subject.

"Has he long eyelashes, and a dreamy look in his eyes, like Valentine?" asked Charlotte, secretly convinced that her lover had a copyright in these personal graces.

"Does he wear whiskers?" asked Georgy. "I remember, when I was quite a girl, and went to parties at Barlingford, being struck by Mr. Sheldon's whiskers. And I was quite offended with papa, who was always making sarcastic remarks, for calling them mutton-chop whiskers; but they really were the shape of mutton-cutlets at that time. He wears them differently now."

Mrs. Sheldon branched off into a disquisition on whiskers, and Diana escaped from the task of describing her lover. She could not have described him to Georgy.

By and by she asked permission to leave Bayswater for a a fortnight, in order to see her lover's home and friends.

"I will come back to you, and stay as long as you like, dear Mrs. Sheldon," she said, "and make you as many caps as you please. And I will make them for you by and by, when I am living abroad, and send them over to you in a bandbox. It will be a great delight to me to be of some little service to a friend who has been so kind. And perhaps you will fancy the caps are prettier when they can boast of being French."

"You darling generous-minded girl! And you won't go away for a fortnight and never come back again, will you, dear? I had a cook who did that, and left me with a large dinner-party hanging over my head; and how I got through it—with a strange man-cook, who charged a guinea, and used fresh butter, at twentypence, a pound, as if it had been dirt, and two strange men to wait—I don't know. It all seemed like a dream. And since then we have generally had everything from the confectioner's; and I assure you, to feel that you can wash your hands of the whole thing, and sit down at the head of your table with your mind as free from care as if you were a visitor, is worth all the expense."

Diana promised she would not behave like the cook; and two days after this conversation left the London Bridge terminus with her father and Gustave Lenoble.

Mr. Sheldon troubled himself very little about this departure. He was informed of Miss Paget's intended marriage; and the information awakened neither surprise nor interest in his heavily-burdened mind.

"A Frenchman, a friend of her father's!" he said; "some swindling adventurer, no doubt," he thought. And this was as much consideration as he could afford to bestow upon Miss Paget's love affairs at this present time.

CHAPTER V.

ASSURANCE DOUBLY SURE.

On the day after Miss Paget's departure Mr. Sheldon came home from the City rather earlier than usual, and found Charlotte alone in the drawing-room, reading a ponderous volume from Mudie of an instructive and edifying character, with a view to making herself clever, in order that she might better understand that prodigy of learning, Mr. Hawkehurst.

She was somewhat inclined to yawn over the big book, which contained a graphic account of recent discoveries of an antiquarian nature. Her mind was not yet attuned to the comprehension of the sublimer elements in such discoveries. She saw only a dryasdust record of futile gropings in desert sand for the traces of perished empires. Her imagination was not cultivated to that point whereat the gift which Mr. Lewes calls "insight" becomes the daily companion, nay, indeed, the ever-haunting and nightmare-bringing influence of the dreamer. For her sands were only sands, the stones were only stones. No splendour of fallen palaces, no glory and pride of perished kings, no clash and clamour of vanished courts, arose from those barren sands, with all their pomp and circumstance, conjured into being by half a word on a broken pillar, or a date upon a Punic monument. Miss Halliday looked up with a sigh of fatigue as her stepfather came into the room. It was not a room that he particularly affected, and she was surprised when he seated himself in the easy-chair opposite her, and poked the fire, as if with the intention of remaining.

"You shouldn't read by firelight, my dear," he said; "it is most destructive to the eyesight."

"I dare say my sight will last my time, papa," the young lady replied carelessly; "but it's very kind of you to think of it, and I won't read any more."

Mr. Sheldon made no reply to this observation. He sat

looking at the fire, with that steady gaze which was habitual to him—the gaze of the man who plans and calculates.

"My dear," he said by-and-by, "it seems that this money to which you may or may not be entitled is more than we thought at first; in fact, it appears that the sum is a considerable one. I have been, and still am, particularly anxious to guard against disappointment on your part, as I know the effect that such a disappointment is apt to produce upon a person's life. The harassing slowness of Chancery proceedings is proverbial; I am therefore especially desirous that you should not count upon this money."

"I shall never do that, papa. I should certainly like a fine edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica* for Valentine, by-and-by, as he says that is essential for a literary man; and a horse, for people say literary men ought to take horse exercise. But beyond that——"

"We need scarcely go into these details, my dear. I want you to understand the broad facts of the case. While, on the one hand, our success in obtaining the inheritance which we are about to claim for you is uncertain, on the other hand the inheritance is large. Of course, when I presented you with the sum of five thousand pounds, I had no idea of this possible inheritance."

"O, of course not, papa."

"But I now find that there is such a possibility as your becoming a—well—a rich woman."

"O papa!"

"In which case I may conclude that your mother would benefit in some measure from your good fortune."

"Can you doubt that, papa? There should be no measure to her benefit from any money obtained by me."

"I do not doubt that, my dear. And it is with that idea that I wish to make a proposition to you—for your mother's possible advantage."

"I shall be happy to do anything you wish, papa."

"It must be done as a spontaneous act of your own, Charlotte, not in accordance with any wish of mine."

"What is it that I am to do?" asked Charlotte.

"Well, my dear, you see it is agreed between us that if you do get this money, your mother is certain to benefit considerably. But unhappily the proceedings are likely to drag on for an indefinite time; and in the course of that time it comes within the limits of possibility that your decease may precede that of your mother."

"Yes, papa."

"In which case your mother would lose all hope of any such advantage."

"Of course, papa."

Charlotte could not help thinking that there was something sordid in this discussion—this calculation of possible gain or loss contingent on her fresh young life. But she concluded that it was the nature of business men to see everything from a debased standpoint, and that Mr. Sheldon was no more sordid than other men of his class.

"Well, papa?" she asked presently, after some moments of silence, during which she and her stepfather had both been absorbed in the contemplation of the fire.

"Well, my dear," replied Mr. Sheldon slowly, "I have been thinking that the natural and easy way of guarding against all contingencies would be by your effecting an insurance on your life in your mother's favour."

"No, no, papa!" cried Charlotte, with unwonted vehemence; "I would rather do anything than that!"

"What can be your objection to such a very simple arrangement?"

"I dare say my objection seems foolish, childish even, papa; but I really have a horror of life assurances. I always think of papa—my own poor father, whom I loved so dearly. It seemed as if he put a price upon his life for us. He was so anxious to insure his life—I remember hearing him talk of it at Hyley, when I was a child—to make things straight, as he said, for us; and, you see, very soon afterwards he died."

"But you can't suppose the insurance of his life had anything to do with his death?"

"Of course not, I am not so childish as that; only——"

"Only you have a foolish lackadaisical prejudice against the only means by which you can protect your mother against a contingency that is so remote as to be scarcely worth consideration. Let it pass."

There was more anger in the tone than in the words. It was not that angry tone, but the mention of her mother, that impressed Miss Halliday. She began to consider that her objections were both foolish and selfish.

"If you really think I ought to insure my life, I will do so," she said presently. "Papa did as much for those he loved; why should I be less thoughtful of others?"

Having once brought Miss Halliday to this frame of mind, the rest was easy. It was agreed between them that as Valentine Hawkehurst was to be kept in ignorance of his betrothed's claim to certain moneys now in the shawdowy under-world of Chancery, so he must be kept in ignorance of the insurance.

It was only one more secret, and Charlotte had learned that it was possible to keep a secret from her lover.

"I suppose before we are married I shall able to tell him everything?" she said.

"Certainly, my dear. All I want is to test his endurance and his prudence. If the course of events proves him worthy of being trusted, I will trust him."

"I am not afraid of that, papa."

"Of course not, my dear. But, you see, I have to protect your interests; and I cannot afford to see this gentleman with your eyes. I am compelled to be prudent."

The stockbroker sighed as he said this—a sigh of utter weariness. Remorse was unknown to him; the finer fibres upon which that chord is struck had not been employed in the fabrication of his heart. But there is a mental fatigue which is a spurious kind of remorse, and has all the anguish of the nobler feeling. It is an utter weariness and prostration of spirit—a sickness of heart and mind—a bitter longing to lie down and die—the weariness of a beaten hound rather than of a baffled man.

This was what Mr. Sheldon felt, as the threads of the web which he was weaving multiplied, and grew daily and hourly more difficult of manipulation. Success in the work which he had to do depended on so many contingencies. Afar off glittered the splendid goal—the undisputed possession of the late John Haygarth's hundred thousand pounds; but between the schemer and that chief end and aim of all his plottings what a sea of troubles! He folded his arms behind his head, and looked across the girlish face of his companion into the shadow and the darkness. In those calculations which were for ever working themselves out in this man's brain, Charlotte Halliday was only one among many figures. She had her fixed value in every sum; but her beauty, her youth, her innocence, her love, her trust, made no unit of that fixed figure, nor weighed in the slightest degree with him who added up the sum. Had she been old, ugly, obnoxious, a creature scarcely fit to live, she would have represented exactly the same amount in the calculations of Philip Sheldon. The graces that made her beautiful were graces that he had no power to estimate. He knew she was a pretty woman; but he knew also that there were pretty women to be seen in any London street; and the difference between his stepdaughter and the lowest of womankind who passed him in his daily walks was to him little more than a social prejudice.

The insurance business being once decided on, Mr. Sheldon lost no time in putting it into execution. Although he made a point of secrecy as regarded Mr. Hawkehurst, he went to work in no underhand manner, but managed matters after a

highly artistic and superior fashion. He took his stepdaughter to the offices of Greenwood and Greenwood, and explained her wishes to one of those gentlemen in her presence. If he dwelt a little more on Miss Halliday's anxiety for her mother's pecuniary advantage than his previous conversation with Miss Halliday warranted, the young lady was too confiding and too diffident to contradict him. She allowed him to state, or rather to imply, that the proposed insurance was her spontaneous wish, an emanation of her anxious and affectionate heart, the natural result of an almost morbid care for her mother's welfare.

Mr. Hargrave Greenwood, of Greenwood and Greenwood, seemed at first inclined to throw cold water on the proposition, but after some little debate, agreed that extreme caution would certainly counsel such a step.

"I should imagine there was no better life amongst the inhabitants of London," he said, "than Miss Shel—pardon me —Miss Halliday's. But, as the young lady herself suggests, 'in the midst of life we are—'; and, as the young lady herself has observed, these things are——ahem—beyond human foresight. If there were any truth in the aphorisms of poets, I should say Miss Halliday cannot insure too quickly; for the remark of Cowper—or, stay, I believe Pope—'whom the gods love die young,' might very well be supposed to apply to so charming a young lady. Happily, the secretaries of insurance offices know very little about the poets, unless, indeed, Miss Halliday were to go to the Royal Widow's and Orphan's Hope, the secretary of which is the author of dramas that may fairly rank with the works of Knowles and Lytton."

Mr. Greenwood, an elderly gentleman of the ponderous and port-wine school, laughed at his own small jokes, and took things altogether pleasantly. He gave Mr. Sheldon a letter of introduction to the secretary of his pet insurance company, the value of which to that gentleman was considerable. Nor was this the only advantage derived from the interview. The lawyer's approval of the transaction reassured Charlotte; and though she had heard her own views somewhat misrepresented, she felt that an operation which appeared wise in the sight of such a lawyer, standing on such a Turkey hearthrug, commanding such gentlemanly-looking clerks as those who came and went at Mr. Greenwood's bidding, must inevitably be a proceeding at once prudent and proper.

The business of the insurance was not quite so easy as the interview with the lawyer. The doctor to whom Miss Halliday was introduced seemed very well satisfied with that young lady's appearance of health and spirits, but in a subsequent interview with Mr. Sheldon asked several questions, and shook his head

gravely when told that her father had died at thirty-seven years of age. But he looked less grave when informed that Mr. Halliday had died of a bilious fever.

"Did Mr. Halliday die in London?" he asked.

"He did."

"I should like—ahem—if it were possible, to see the medical man who attended him. These fevers rarely prove fatal unless there is some predisposing cause."

"In this case there was none."

"You speak rather confidently, Mr. Sheldon, as a non-professional man."

"I speak with a certain amount of professional knowledge. I knew Tom Halliday for many years."

Mr. Sheldon forebore to state that Tom Halliday had died in his house, and had been attended by him. It is, perhaps, only natural that Philip Sheldon, the stockbroker of repute, should wish to escape identification with Philip Sheldon, the unsuccessful dentist of Bloomsbury.

After a little more conversational skirmishing, the confidential physician of the Prudential Step Assurance Company agreed to consider that Mr. Halliday's constitution had been in no manner compromised by his early death, and to pass Charlotte's life. The motives for effecting the insurance were briefly touched upon in Mr. Greenwood's letter of introduction, and appeared very proper and feasible in the eyes of the directors; so, after a delay of a few days, the young lady found herself accepted, and Mr. Sheldon put away among his more important papers a large oblong envelope, containing a policy of assurance on his step-daughter's life for five thousand pounds. He did not, however, stop here, but made assurance doubly sure by effecting a second insurance upon the same young life with the Widow's and Orphan's Hope Society, within a few days of the first transaction.

Book the Sixth.

DIANA IN NORMANDY.

CHAPTER I.

AT CÔTENOIR.

Beaubocage, near Vevinord, March 15, 186—.

My darling Lotta,—As you extorted from me a solemn pledge that I would write you a full and detailed account of my adventures, I seat myself in Mademoiselle Lenoble's pretty little turret-chamber, in the hope of completing the first instalment of my work before papa or Gustave summons me to prepare for a drive and visit to the Convent of the Sacred Heart, which, I believe, has been planned for to-day.

What am I to tell you, dear, and how shall I begin my story? Let me fancy myself sitting at your feet before your bedroom fire, and you looking down at me with that pretty inquisitive look in your dear grey eyes. Do you know that M. Lenoble's eyes are almost the colour of yours, Lotta? You asked me a dozen questions about his eyes the other day, and I could give you no clear description of them; but yesterday, as he stood at the window looking out across the garden, I saw their real colour. It is grey, a deep clear grey, and his lashes are dark, like yours. How shall I begin? That is the grand difficulty! I suppose you will want to know something even about the journey. Everything was very pleasant, in spite of the cold blusterous March weather. Do you know what my last journey was like, Lotta? It was the long dreary journey from Forêt-dechêne to St. Katharine's Wharf, when Mr. Hawkehurst advised and arranged my return to England. I had been sitting quite alone in a balcony overlooking the little town. It was after midnight, but the lights were still burning: I can see the lamplit windows shining through the night mist as I write this, and the sense of the hopeless misery of that time comes back to me like the breath of some freezing wind. I can find no words to tell you how desolate I was that night, or how hopeless.

I dared not think of my future life; or of the next day, that was to be the beginning of that hopeless future. I was obliged

to bind my thoughts to the present and all its dreariness; and a kind of dull apathetic feeling, which was too dull for despair, took possession of me that night. While I was sitting there Mr. Hawkehurst came to me, and told me that my father had become involved in a quarrel, under circumstances of a very shameful nature, which I need not tell you, darling. He recommended me to leave Forêtdechêne—indeed, almost insisted that I should do so. He wanted to rescue me from that miserable life. Your lover had noble and generous impulses even then, you see, dear; at his worst he was not all bad, and needed only your gentle influence to purify and elevate his character. He gave me all the money he possessed to pay the expenses of my journey. Ah, what a dreary journey! I left Forêtdechêne in the chill daybreak, and travelled third class, with dreadful Belgians who smelt of garlic, to Antwerp. I slept at a very humble inn near the quay, and started for England by the Baron Osy at noon next day. I cannot tell you how lonely I felt on board the steamer. I had travelled uncomfortably before, but never without my father and Valentine—and he had been always kind to me. If we were shabbily dressed, and people thought ill of us, I did not care. The spirit of Bohemianism must have been very strong with me in those days. I remembered how we had sat together on the same boat watching the sleepy shores of Holland, or making fun of our respectable fellow-passengers. Now I was quite alone. People stared at me rudely and unkindly, as I thought. I could not afford to dine or breakfast with the rest; and I was weak enough to feel wounded by the idea that people would guess my motive for shunning the savoury banquets that sent up such horrid odours to the deck where I sat, trying to read a tattered Tauchnitz novel. And the end of my journey? Ah, Charlotte, you can never imagine what it is to travel like that, without knowing whether there is any haven, any shelter for you at the end of your wanderings! I knew that at a certain hour we were to arrive at St. Katharine's Dock, but beyond that I knew nothing. I counted my money. There was just enough to pay for a cab that would carry me to Hyde Lodge. I should land there penniless. And what if my cousin Priscilla should refuse to receive me? For a moment I fancied even that possible; and I pictured myself walking about London, hungry and homeless.

This was my last journey. I have dwelt upon it longer than I need have done; but I want you to understand what it is that makes Gustave Lenoble dear to me. If you could feel the contrast between the past and the present as I felt it when I stood on the deck of the Dover packet with him by my side, you would know why I love him, and am grateful to him. We stood side

by side, watching the waves and talking of our future, while my father enjoyed a nap in one of the little deck cabins. To Gustave that future seems very bright and clear; to me it seems unutterably strange that the future *can* be anything but a dismal *terra incognita*, from the contemplation of which it is wise to refrain.

Papa stays with Gustave at Côtenoir; but it had been arranged for me to visit Mademoiselle Lenoble, Gustave's aunt, at Beaubocage, and to remain with her during my stay in Normandy. I at once understood the delicate feeling which prompted this arrangement. We dined at Rouen, and came to Vevinord in a coach. At Vevinord a queer little countrified vehicle met us, with a very old man, of the farm-servant class, as coachman. Gustave took the reins from the old man's hand and drove to Beaubocage, where Mademoiselle Lenoble received me with much cordiality. She is a dear old lady, with silvery bands of hair neatly arranged under the prettiest of caps. Her gown is black silk, and her collar and cuffs of snowy whiteness; everything about her exquisitely neat, and of the fashion of twenty, or perhaps thirty, years ago.

And now, I suppose, you will want to know what Beaubocage is like. Well, dear, much as I admire Mademoiselle Lenoble, I must confess that her ancestral mansion is neither grand nor pretty. It might have made a very tolerable farmhouse, but has been spoiled by the architect's determination to make it a château. It is a square white building, with two pepper-castor-like turrets, in one of which I write this letter. Between the garden and the high road there is a wall, surmounted with plaster vases. The garden is for the greater part utilitarian; but in front of the salon windows there is a grassplot, bordered by stiff gravel-walks, and relieved by a couple of flower-beds. A row of tall poplars alone screens the house from the dusty high road. At the back of it there is an orchard; on one side a farmyard; behind the orchard lie the fields that compose the farm of Beaubocage and the paternal estate of the Lenoble family. All around the country is very flat. The people seem to be kind and simple, and devotedly attached to "Mademoiselle." There is a rustic peacefulness pervading everything which, for me, stands instead of beauty.

I am hypocrite enough to pretend to be pleased with everything, for I can perceive how anxiously M. Lenoble watches me in order to discover whether I like his native country. He was not born at Beaubocage, but in Paris. Mademoiselle Lenoble told me the story of his childhood, and how she brought him to Beaubocage, when quite a little fellow, from Rouen, where his father died. About his mother there seems to have been some mystery. Mademoiselle told me nothing of this, except that her

brother, Gustave the elder, made a love-match, and thereby offended his father. She has the little crib in which her nephew, Gustave the younger, slept on the night of his coming. It had been his father's little bed thirty years before. She shed tears as she told me the story, and how she sat and watched by the little fellow as he cried himself to sleep with his head lying on her arm, and the summer moonlight shining full upon his face.

I was deeply touched by her manner as she told me these things; and I think, if I had not already learned to love M. Lenoble, I should love him for the sake of his aunt. She is charming; a creature so innocent and pure, that one considers one's words in speaking to her, almost as if she were a child. She is about forty years older than I; yet for worlds I would not tell her of the people and the scenes I have beheld at foreign watering-places and gambling-rooms. She has spent the sixty years of her life so completely out of the world, that she has retained the freshness and sweetness of her youth untainted in the least degree. Can there be magical philtre equal to this—a pure unselfish life, far away from the clamour of cities?

The old servant who waits upon me is seventy-five years of age, and remembers Ma'amselle Cydalise from her childhood. She is always singing the praises of her mistress, and she sees that I like to hear them. "Ah, ma'amselle," she said to me, "to marry a Lenoble is to marry one of the angels. I will not say that the old seigneur was not hard towards his son. Ah, yes, but it was a noble heart. And the young monsieur—that one who died in Rouen, the Poor!—ah, that he was kind, that he was gracious! What of tears, what of regrets, when the Old chased him!"

My position is quite recognised. I think the very cowboy in the farmyard—a broad-shouldered lad, with a good-natured mindless face, and prodigious wooden shoes like clumsy canoes—even the cowboy knows that I am to be Madame Lenoble of Côtenoir. Côtenoir is the Windsor Castle of this district; Beaubocage is only Frogmore. Yes, dear, the bond is signed and sealed. Even if I did not love M. Lenoble, I have bound myself to marry him; but I do love him, and thank him with all my heart for having given a definite end and aim to my life. Don't think I underrate your kindness, darling; I know that I should never want a home while you could give me one. But 'tis hard to be a hanger-on in any household; and Valentine will exact all his sweet young wife's love and care.

I have written you a letter which I am sure will require double postage; so I will say no more except goodbye. Take care of yourself, dear one. Practise your part in our favourite duets; remember your morning walk in the garden; and don't

wear out your eyes over the big books that Mr. Hawkehurst is obliged to read.

Ever your affectionate

DIANA.

From Charlotte Halliday to Diana Paget.

The dullest house in Christendom, Monday.

EVER DEAREST DI,—Your letter was a welcome relief to the weariness of my existence. How I wish I were with you! But that is too bright a dream. I am sure I should idolise Beauboeage. I should not mind the dismal row of poplars, or the flat landscape, or the dusty road, or anything, so long as it was not like Bayswater. I languish for a change, dear. I have seen so little of the world, except the dear moorland farmhouse at Newhall. I don't think I was ever created to be "cabined, cribbed, confined," in such a narrow life as this, amid such a dull, unchanging round of daily commonplace. Sometimes, when the cold spring moon is shining over the tree-tops in Kensington-Gardens, I think of Switzerland, and the snow-clad mountains and fair Alpine valleys we have read of and talked of, until my heart aches at the thought that I may never see them; and to think that there are people in whom the word 'Savoy' awakes no fairer image than a cabbage! Ah, my poor dear! isn't it almost wicked of me to complain, when *you* have had such bitter experience of the hard cruel world?

I am quite in love with your dear Mademoiselle Lenoble; almost as deeply as I am in love with your magnanimous, chivalrous, generous, audacious—everything ending in *ous*—Monsieur Lenoble.

How dare you call him M. Lenoble, by the bye? I have counted the occasions on which you write of him in your nice long letter, and for one Gustave there are half a dozen M. Lenobles. It must be Gustave in future to me, remember.

What shall I tell you, dear? I have nothing to tell, really nothing. To say that I wish you were with me is only to confess that I am very selfish; but I *do* wish for you, dear—my friend and adopted sister, my old school companion, from whom, willingly, I have never concealed one thought.

Valentine called on Tuesday afternoon; but I have nothing to tell you even about him. Mamma dozed in her corner after her cup of tea, and Val and I sat by the fire talking over our future, just like you and M. Lenoble on board the Calais boat. How much engaged people find to say about the future! Is it our love that makes it seem so bright, so different from all that has gone before? I cannot fancy life with Valentine otherwise than happy. I strive to picture trials, and fancy myself in prison with him, the wind blowing in at broken windows, the

rain coming through the dilapidated roof and pattering on the carpetless floor; but the most dismal picture I can paint won't seem dismal if his figure is a part of it. We would stop the broken windows with rags and paper, we would wipe up the rain with our pocket-handkerchiefs, and sit side by side and talk of the future, as we do now. Hope could never abandon us while we were together. And then, sometimes, while I am looking at Valentine, the thought that he might die comes to me suddenly, like the touch of an icy hand upon my heart.

I lie awake at night sometimes thinking of this, and of papa's early death. He came home one night with a cold, and from that hour grew worse until he died. Ah, think what misery for a wife to suffer! Happily for mamma, she is not capable of suffering intensely. She was very sorry, and even now when she speaks of papa she cries a little; but the tears don't hurt her. I think, indeed, they give her a kind of pleasure.

See, dear, what a long egotistical letter I have written, after all. I will say no more, except that while I am delighted to think of your pleasure among new friends and new scenes, my selfish heart still longs for the hour that is to bring you back to me.

Pray tell me all you can about your daughters that are to be.

Ever and ever your loving

CHARLOTTE.

From Diana Paget to Charlotte Halliday.

Beaubocage, near Vevinord, March 30, 186—.

MY DEAR LOTTA,—In three days more I hope to be with you; but I suppose, in the meantime, I must keep my promise, and send you a faithful account of my life here. Everyone here is more kind to me than words can tell; and I have nothing left to wish for, except that you were here to be delighted, as I am sure you would be, with the freshness and the strangeness of everything. If I ever do become Madame Lenoble—and even yet I *cannot* picture to myself that such a thing will be—you must come to Côtenoir, you and Valentine. I was taken through every room in the old château the day before yesterday, and I fixed in my own mind upon the rooms I will give you, if these things come to pass. They are very old rooms, and I can fancy what strange people must have lived in them, and died in them perhaps, in the days that are gone. But if you come to them, they shall be made bright and pretty, and we will chase the shadows of the mediæval age away. There are old pictures, old musical instruments, quaint spindle-legged chairs and tables, tapestries that crumble as you touch them—the ashes and relics of many generations. Gustave says we will sweep these poor vestiges away, and begin a new life when I come to Côtenoir;

but I cannot find it in my heart to obliterate every trace of those dead feet that have come and gone in all the dusky passages of my future home.

And now I must tell you about my daughters that are to be—my daughter that is, I may say of the elder—for I love her so well already that no breach between Gustave and me could rob her of my affection. She is the dearest, most loving of creatures; and she reminds me of you! I dare say you will laugh at this, dear; and, mind, I do not say that Clarice Lenoble is actually like you in complexion or feature—those common attributes which every eye can see; the resemblance is far more subtle. There is a look in this dear girl's face, a smile, an I-know-not-what, which every now and then recalls your own bright countenance. You will say this is mere fancy—and that is what I told myself at the first; but I found afterwards that it is no fancy, but really one of those vague, indefinable, accidental likenesses which one perceives so often. To me it seems a very happy accident; for my first glance at my daughter's face told me that I should love her for your sake.

We went to the convent the day before yesterday. It is a curious old place, and was once a stately château, the habitation of a noble family. A little portress, in the black robes of a lay sister, admitted us, and conducted us to the parlour, a fine old room, decorated with pictures of a religious character, painted by members of the sisterhood. Here Gustave and I were received by the superioress, an elderly woman, with a mild holy face, and a quiet grace of manner which might become a duchess. She sent for the demoiselles Lenoble, and after a delay of a quarter of an hour—you remember the toilet the girls at Hyde Lodge were obliged to make before they went to the drawing-room, Lotta—Mademoiselle Lenoble came, a tall, slim, lovely and lovable girl, who reminded me of the dearest friend I have in this world. She ran to her papa first, and saluted him with an enthusiastic hug; and then she stood for a moment looking shyly at me, confused and doubtful. It was only for a moment she was left in doubt. Gustave bent down to whisper something in her ear—something for which his letters had in some manner prepared her. The fair young face brightened, the clear grey eyes looked up at me with a sweet affectionate gaze, and she came to me and kissed me. "I shall love you very much," she whispered. "And I love you very much already," I answered, in the same confidential manner. And I think these few words, that one pretty confiding look in her innocent eyes, made a tie between us that it would take much to loosen. Ah, Lotta, what a wide gulf between the Diana Paget who landed alone at St. Katharine's Wharf, in the dim cheerless dawn, and uncertain where to find a shelter in all that busy city, and the same

creature redeemed by your affection, and exalted by the love and trust of Gustave Lenoble!

After this my second daughter appeared—a pretty young hoyden, with lovable clinging ways; and then the superioress asked if I would like to see the garden. Of course I said yes; and we were taken through the long corridors, out into a fine old garden, where the pupils, who looked like the Hyde Lodge girls translated into French, were prancing and scampering about in the usual style. After the garden we went to the chapel, where there were more pictures, and flower-bedecked altars, and pale twinkling tapers burning here and there in the chill sunlight. Here there were damsels engaged in pious meditation, from five years old upwards. They send even the little ones to meditate, Clarice tells me; and there are these infants kneeling before the flower-bedecked altars, rapt in religious contemplation, like so many Thomas à Kempises. The young meditators glanced shyly at us as we passed. When they had shown me everything of special interest in the pleasant old place, Clarice and Madelon ran off to dress for walking, in order to accompany us to Côtenoir, where we were to dine.

It was quite a family party. Mademoiselle Lenoble was there, and papa. He arrived at the château while Gustave and I were paying our visit to the convent. He is in the highest spirits, and treats me with an amount of affection and courtesy I have not been accustomed to receive at his hands. Of course I know the cause of this change; the future mistress of Côtenoir is a very different person from that wretched girl who was nothing to him but a burden and an encumbrance. But even while I despise him I cannot refuse to pity him. One forgives anything in old age. In this, at least, it is a second childhood; and my father is very old, Lotta. I saw the look of age in his face more plainly at Côtenoir, where he assumed his usual *debonnaire* man-of-the-world tone and manner, than I had seen it in London, when he was a professed invalid. He is much changed since I was with him at Forêtdechêne. It seems as if he had kept Time at bay very long, and now at last the common enemy will be held at arm's-length no longer. He still braces himself up in the old military manner, still holds himself more erect than many men of half his age; but, in spite of all this, I can see that he is very feeble; shaken and worn by a long life of difficulty. I am glad to think that there will be a haven for him at last; and if I did not thank Gustave with my whole heart for giving me a home and a place in the world, I should thank him for giving a shelter to my father.

And now, dear, as I hope to be with you so very soon, I shall say no more. I am to spend a day in Rouen before we come back—papa and I, that is to say; Gustave stays in Nor-

mandy to make some arrangements before he comes back to England. I cannot comprehend the business relations between him and papa; but there is some business going on—law business, as it seems to me—about which papa is very important and elated.

I am to see the cathedral and churches at Rouen, and I shall contrive to see the shops, and to bring you something pretty. Papa has given me money—the first he ever gave me unasked. I have very little doubt it comes from Gustave; but I have no sense of shame in accepting it. M. Lenoble's seems to me a royal nature, formed to bestow benefits and bounties on every side.

Tell Mrs. Sheldon that I shall bring her the prettiest cap I can find in Rouen; and, with all love, believe me ever you affectionate

DIANA.

Book the Seventh.

A CLOUD OF FEAR.

CHAPTER I.

THE BEGINNING OF SORROW.

WHO heeds the cloud no bigger than a man's hand amidst a broad expanse of blue ether? The faint, scarce perceptible menace of that one little cloud is lost in the wide brightness of a summer sky. The traveller jogs on contented and unthinking, till the hoarse roar of stormy winds, or the first big drops of the thunder-shower, startle him with a sudden consciousness of the coming storm.

It was early May, and the young leaves were green in the avenues of Kensington Gardens; Bayswater was bright and gay with fashionable people; and Mrs. Sheldon found herself strong enough to enjoy her afternoon drive in Hyde Park, where the contemplation of the bonnets afforded her perennial delight.

"I think they are actually smaller than ever this year," she remarked every season; and every season the headgear of fashionable London did indeed seem to shrink and dwindle, "fine by degrees, and beautifully less." The coalscuttle-shaped headdress of our grandmothers had not yet resolved itself into

a string of beads and a rosebud in these days, but was obviously tending thitherward.

Charlotte and Diana accompanied Mrs. Sheldon in her drives. The rapture of contemplating the bonnets was not complete unless the lady had some sympathising spirit to share her delight. The two girls were very well pleased to mingle in that brilliant crowd, and to go back to their own quiet life when the mystic hour came, and that bright vision of colour and beauty melted into the twilight loneliness. It had seemed just lately, however, as if Charlotte was growing a little weary of the gorgeous spectacle—the ever-changing, ever-splendid diorama of West End life. She no longer exclaimed at the sight of each exceptional toilette; she no longer smiled admiringly on the thoroughbred horses champing their bits in the immediate neighbourhood of her bonnet; she no longer gave a little cry of delight when the big drags came slowly along the crowded ranks, the steel bars shining as they swung loosely in the low afternoon sunlight, the driver, conscious of his glory, grave and tranquil, with the pride that apes humility.

"See, Lotta," said Miss Paget, upon an especially bright May evening, as one of these gorgeous equipages went past Mr. Sheldon's landau, "there's another drag. Did you see it?"

"Yes, dear, I saw it."

"And are you tired of four-in-hands? You used to admire them so much."

"I admire them as much as ever, dear."

"And yet you scarcely gave those four splendid roans a glance."

"No," Charlotte answered, with a faint sigh.

"Are you tired, Lotta?" Miss Paget asked, rather anxiously. There was something in Charlotte's manner of late that had inspired her with a vague sense of anxiety; some change which she could scarcely define—a change so gradual that it was only by comparing the Charlotte of some months ago with the Charlotte of the present that she perceived how real a change it was. The buoyancy and freshness, the girlish vivacity of Miss Halliday's manner, were rapidly giving place to habitual listlessness. "Are you tired, dear?" she repeated, anxiously; and Mrs. Sheldon looked round from her contemplation of the bonnets.

"No, Di, dearest, not tired; but—I don't feel very well this afternoon."

This was the first confession which Charlotte Halliday made of a sense of weakness and languor that had been creeping upon her during the last two months, so slowly, so gradually, that the change seemed too insignificant for notice.

"You feel ill, Lotta dear?" Diana asked.

"Well, no, not exactly ill. I can scarcely call it illness; I feel rather weak—that is really all."

At this point Mrs. Sheldon chimed in, with her eyes on a passing bonnet as she spoke.

"You see, you are so dreadfully neglectful of your papa's advice, Lotta," she said, in a complaining tone. "Do *you* like pink roses with mauve areophane, Diana? *I* do not. Look at that primrose tulle, with dead ivy-leaves and scarlet berries, in the barouche. I dare say you have not taken your glass of old port this morning, Charlotte, and have only yourself to thank if you feel weak."

"I did take a glass of port this morning, mamma. I don't like it; but I take it every morning."

"Don't like old tawny port, that your papa bought at the sale of a bishop of somewhere? It's perfectly absurd of you, Lotta, to talk of not liking wine that cost fifteen shillings a bottle, and which your papa's friends declare to be worth five-and-thirty."

"I am sorry it is so expensive, mamma; but I can't teach myself to think it nice," answered Charlotte, with a smile that sadly lacked the brightness of a few weeks ago. "I think one requires to go into the City, and become a merchant or a stock-broker, before one can like that sort of wine. What was it Valentine quoted in the *Cheapside*, about some lady whom somebody loved?—'To love her was a liberal education.' I think to like old port is a commercial education."

"I am sure such wine *ought* to do you good," said Georgy, almost querulously. She thought this bright blooming creature had no right to be ill. The headaches, and little weaknesses and languors and ladylike ailments, were things for which she (Georgy) had taken out a patent; and this indisposition of her daughter's was an infringement of copyright.

"I dare say the port will do me good, mamma, in time. No doubt I shall be as strong as that person who strangled lions and snakes and dogs with incalculable heads, and all that kind of thing."

"I really wish you would not talk in that absurd manner, my dear," said Mrs. Sheldon with offended dignity. "I think you really cannot be too grateful for your papa's kind thoughtfulness and anxiety about you. I am sure I myself am not so anxious as he is; but of course his medical knowledge makes him doubly careful. Six weeks ago he noticed that you wanted strength—tone is what he calls it. 'Georgiana,' he said to me, 'Charlotte wants tone. She is beginning to stoop in a really lamentable manner: we must make her take port or bark, or something of a strengthening kind.' And then a day or two afterwards he decided on port, and gave me the key of the

cellar—which is a thing he rarely gives out of his own hands—and told me the number of the bin from which I was to take the wine—some old wine that he had laid by on purpose for some special occasion; and no one is to have it but you, and you are to take a glass daily at eleven o'clock. Mr. Sheldon is most particular about the hour. The regularity of the thing is half the battle in these cases, he says; and I am sure if you do not observe his wishes and mine, Charlotte, it will be really ungrateful of you."

"But, dear mamma, I do observe Mr.—papa's wishes. I take my glass of port every morning at eleven. I go to your cupboard in the breakfast-room and take out my special decanter, and my special glass, in the most punctiliously precise manner. I don't like the wine, and I don't like the trouble involved in the ceremony of drinking it; but I go through it most religiously, to please you and papa."

"And do you mean to say that you do not feel stronger after taking that expensive old port regularly for nearly six weeks.

"I am sorry to say that I do not, mamma. I think if there is any change, it is that I am weaker."

"Dear, dear me!" exclaimed Mrs. Sheldon captiously, "you are really a most extraordinary girl."

Mrs. Sheldon could almost have found it in her heart to say, a most ungrateful girl. There did seem a kind of ingratitude in this futile consumption of old port at fifteen shillings a bottle.

"I'll tell you what it is, Lotta," she said presently, "I am convinced that your illness—or your weakness—is all fancy."

"Why so, mamma?"

"Because, if it were real weakness, that old port *must* have made you stronger. And the fact that the port does you no good, is a proof that your weakness is only fancy. Girls of your age are so full of fancies. Look at me, and the martyrdom I go through with my nervous headaches, which perfectly prostrate me, after the least worry or excitement. The nerves of my head, after going into the butcher's book, are perfect agony. When you come to have a house to look after, and find what it is to have the same saddle of mutton charged for twice over, with the most daring impudence—or to have capers and curriepowder, that you *know* you've never had, staring at you from every page of your grocer's book, and nothing but your memory between you and utter ruin—you'll discover what it is to be really ill."

In this easy manner did Mrs. Sheldon dismiss the subject of her daughter's illness. But it was not so easily dismissed by Diana Paget, who loved her friend with a profound and pure

affection, than which no sister's love was ever warmer or stronger. Even Valentine's preference for this happy rival had not lessened Diana's love for her friend and benefactress. She had been jealous of Charlotte's happier fate: but in the hour when this jealousy was most bitter there had been no wavering in her attachment to this one true and generous friend.

Miss Paget was very silent during the homeward drive. She understood now what that change had been in her friend which until now had so perplexed her. It was a decay of physical strength which had robbed Lotta's smile of its brightness, her laugh of its merry music. It was physical languor that made her so indifferent to the things which had once awakened her girlish enthusiasm. The discovery was a very painful one. Diana remembered her experience of Hyde Lodge: the girls who had grown day by day more listless, now in the doctor's hands for a day or two, now well again and toiling at the old treadmill round of study, now sinking into confirmed invalids; until the bitter hour in which parents are summoned, and the doctor urges rest, and the fond mother carries her darling home, assured that home comfort and tenderness will speedily restore her. Her schoolfellows cluster round the carriage to bid her "good-bye until next half," full of hopeful talk about her swift recovery. But when the vacation is over, and Black Monday comes, she is not amongst the returning scholars. Has she not gone up to the higher school, and answered *Adsum* to the call of the Great Master?

Diana remembered these old experiences with cruel pain.

"Girls, as bright and lovable as she is, have drooped and faded away, just when they seem brightest and happiest," she thought as she watched Charlotte, and perceived to-day for the first time that the outline of her fair young cheek had lost its perfect roundness.

But in such a case love can do nothing except watch and wait. That night, in the course of that girlish talk in Charlotte's bedroom, which had become a habit with the two girls, Diana extorted from her friend a full account of the symptoms which had affected her within the last few weeks.

"Pray don't look so anxious, dear Di," she said gaily; "it is really nothing worth talking of; and I knew that if I confessed to feeling ill you and mamma would straightway begin to worry yourselves about me. I have felt a little sick and faint sometimes; and now and then a sudden dizziness has come over me. It is nothing of any consequence, and it passes away very quickly. Sometimes I have a kind of torpid languid feeling, which is scarcely unpleasant, only strange, you know. But what does it all amount to, except that I am nervous?"

"You must have change of air, Lotta," said Diana resolutely,

"and change of scene. Yes, no doubt you are nervous. You have been kept almost a prisoner in the house through Mr. Sheldon's punctilious nonsense. You miss our brisk morning walks in the Gardens, I dare say. If you were to go to Yorkshire, now, to your friends at Newhall, you would like that change, dear, wouldn't you?"

"Yes, I should dearly like to see Aunt Dorothy and uncle Joe; but —"

"But what, darling?"

"I should scarcely like being at Newhall, unless—you'll think me very foolish, Di—unless Valentine was with me. We were so happy there, you see, dear; and it was there he first told me he loved me. No, Di, I couldn't bear Newhall without him."

"Poor Aunt Dorothy, poor uncle Joe! feathers when weighed in the scale against a young man whom their niece has known less than a twelvemonth!"

No more was said about Charlotte's illness; Diana was too prudent to alarm her friend by any expression of uneasiness. She adopted a cheering tone, and the conversation drifted into other channels.

While Diana's concern for her friend's altered health was yet a new feeling, she found herself called upon to attend her father once more in the character of a ministering angel. And this time Captain Paget's illness was something more than gout. It was, according to his doctors—he had on this occasion two medical attendants—a general breaking up of the system. The poor old wanderer,—the weary Odysseus, hero of so many trickeries, such varied adventures,—laid himself down to rest, within view of the Promised Land for which his soul yearned.

He was very ill. Gustave Lenoble, who came back to London, did not conceal from Diana that the illness threatened to end fatally. At his instigation the Captain had been removed from Omega Street to pleasant lodgings at the back of Knightsbridge Road, overlooking Hyde Park. This was nearer Bayswater, and it was very pleasant for the fading old worldling. He could see the stream of fashion flowing past as he sat in his easy-chair, propped up with pillows, with the western sunlight on his face. He pointed out the liveries and armorial bearings; and told many scandalous and entertaining anecdotes of their past and present owners to Gustave Lenoble, who devoted much of his time to the solacement of the invalid. Everything that affection could do to smooth this dreary time was done for the tired Ulysses. Pleasant books were read to him; earnest thoughts were suggested by earnest words; hothouse flowers adorned his cheerful sitting-room; hothouse fruits gladdened his eye by their rich warmth of colour, and invited his parched lips

to taste their cool ripeness. Gustave had a piano brought in, so that Diana might sing to her father in the dusky May evenings, when it should please him to hear her. Upon the last feeble footsteps of this old man, whose life had been very selfish and wicked, pity waited with a carefulness so fond and tender that he might well mistake it for love. Was it fair that his last days should be so peaceful and luxurious, when many a good man falls down to die in the streets, worn out with the life-long effort to bear the burden laid upon his weary shoulders? In the traditions of the Rabbins it is written that those are the elect of God who suffer His chastisement in the flesh. For the others, for those who on earth drain the goblet of pleasure, and riot in the raptures of sin, for them comes the dread retribution after death. They are plunged in the fire, and driven before the wind; they take the shape of loathsome reptiles, and ascend by infinitesimal degrees through all the grades of creation, until their storm-tost wearied degraded souls re-enter human semblance once more. But even then their old stand-point is not yet regained; their dread penance not yet performed. As men they are the lowest and worst of men; slaves toiling in the desert; dirt to be trampled under the feet of their prosperous brethren. Inch by inch the wretched soul regains its lost inheritance; cycles must elapse before the awful sentence is fulfilled.

Our Christian faith knows no such horrors. Even for the penitent of the eleventh hour there is promise of pardon. The most earnest desire of Diana's heart was that her father should enroll himself amongst those late penitents—those last among the last who crowd in to the marriage feast, half afraid to show their shame-darkened faces in that glorious company.

If we forgive all things to old age, so much the more surely do we forgive all injuries to the fading enemy. That she had suffered much cruelty and neglect at the hands of her father, was a fact that Diana could not forget, any more than she could forget the name which he had given her. It was a part of her life not to be put off or done away with. But in these last days, with all her heart she forgave and pitied him. She pitied him for the crooked paths into which his feet had wandered at the very outset of life, and from which so weak a soul could find no issue. She pitied him for that moral blindness which had kept him pleasantly unconscious of the supreme depth of his degradation—a social Laplander, who never having seen a western summer, had no knowledge that his own land was dark and benighted.

Happily for Diana and her generous lover, the Captain was not a difficult penitent. He was indeed a man who, having lost the capacity and the need for sin, took very kindly to penitence, as a species of sentimental luxury.

"Yes, my dear," he said complacently—for even in the hour

of his penitence he insisted on regarding himself as a social martyr—"my life has been a very hard one. Fortune has not been kind to me. In the words of the immortal bard, my lines have *not* been set in pleasant places. I should have been glad if Providence had allowed me to be a better father to you, a better husband to your poor mother—a better Christian, in fact—and had spared me the repeated humiliation of going through the Insolvent Debtors' Court. It is not always easy to understand the justice of these things: and it has often appeared to me that something of the favouritism which is the bane of our governments on earth must needs obtain at a higher tribunal. One man enters life with an entailed estate worth seventy thousand a-year, while another finds himself in the hands of the Jews before he is twenty years of age. 'There's something in this world amiss shall be unriddled by and by,' as the poet observes. The circumstances of my own existence I have ever regarded as dark and enigmatic. And, indeed, the events of this life are altogether inexplicable, my love. There is that fellow Sheldon, now, who began life as a country dentist, a man without family or connections, who—well, I will not repine. If I am spared to behold my daughter mistress of a fine estate, although in a foreign country, I can depart in peace. But you must have a house in town, my dear. Yes, London must be your head-quarters. You must not be buried alive in Normandy. There is no place like London. Take the word of a man who has seen the finest Continental cities, and lived in them—that is the point, my love—lived in them. For a fine afternoon in the beginning of May, an apartment in the Champs Elysées, or the Boulevard, is an earthly paradise; but the Champs Elysées in a wet December—the Boulevard in a sweltering August! London is the only spot upon earth that is never intolerable. And your husband will be a rich man, my dear girl, a really wealthy man; and you must see that he makes a fitting use of his wealth, and does his duty to society. The parable of the Talents, which you were reading to me this afternoon, is a moral lesson your husband must not forget."

After this fashion did the invalid discourse. Gustave and Diana perceived that he still hoped to have his share in their future life, still looked to pleasant days to come in a world which he had loved, not wisely, but too well. Nor could they find it in their hearts to tell him that his journey was drawing to a close, and that on the very threshold of the peaceful home which his diplomatic arts had helped to secure, he was to abandon life's weary race.

They indulged his hopes a little, in order to win him the more easily to serious thoughts; but though at times quite ready to abandon himself to a penitential mood that was almost maudlin,

there were other times when the old Adam asserted himself, and the Captain resented this intrusion of serious subjects as a kind of impertinence.

"I am not aware that I am at my last gasp, Diana," he said with dignity, on one of these occasions; "or that I need to be talked to by my own daughter as if I were on my deathbed. I can show you men some years my senior driving their phaetons-and-pairs in that Park. The Gospel is all very well in its place—during Sunday-morning service, and after morning prayers, in your good old county families, where the household is large enough to make a fair show at the end of the dining-room, without bringing in hulking lads who smell of the stables: but I consider that when a man is ill, there is a considerable want of tact in bringing the subject of religion before him in any obtrusive manner."

Thus the Captain alternated from sentimental penitence to captious worldliness, during may days and weeks. The business of the Haygarthian inheritance was progressing slowly, but surely. Documents were being prepared, attested copies of certificates of marriages, births, baptisms, and burials were being procured, and all was tending towards the grand result. Once, and sometimes twice a week, M. Fleurus came to see Captain Paget, and discussed the great affair with that invalid diplomatist. The Captain had long ago been aware that in entering upon an alliance with that gentleman, he had invoked the aid of a coadjutor likely to prove too strong for him. The event had justified his fears. M. Fleurus had something of Victor Hugo's famous *Poulpe* in his nature. Powerful as flexible were the arms he stretched forth to grasp all prizes in the way of heirs-at-law and disputed heritages, unclaimed railway-stock, and forgotten consols. If the Captain had not played his cards very cleverly, and contrived to obtain a personal influence over Gustave Lenoble, he might have found himself thrust entirely out of the business by one of the Frenchman's gelatinous arms. Happily for his own success, however, the Captain did obtain a strong hold upon Gustave. This enabled him to protect his own interests throughout the negotiation, and to keep the insidious Fleurus at bay.

"My good friend," he said, in his grand Carlton-House manner, "I am bound to protect the interests of my friend M. Lenoble, in any agreement to be entered upon in this matter. I cannot permit M. Lenoble's generosity or M. Lenoble's inexperience to be imposed upon. My own interests are of secondary importance. That I expect to profit by the extraordinary discovery made by me—by ME—alone and unaided, I do not affect to deny. But I will not profit at the expense of a too generous friend."

"And what recompense am I to have for my work—a work

at once painful and impoverishing?" asked the little Frenchman, with an angry and suspicious look. "Do you believe that I do that to amuse me? To run the streets, to go by here, by there, in hunting the papers of that marriage, or this baptism? Believe you that is so agreeable, Monsieur the Captain? No; I desire to be paid for my work. I must have my part in the heritage which I have help to win."

"It is not won yet. We will talk of your recompense by and by."

"We will talk of it this instant—upon the field. It must that I comprehend where I am in this affair. I will not of mystifications, of prevarications, of lies——"

"M. Fleurus!" cried the Captain, with a hand stretched towards the bell.

"You will sound—you will chase me! Ah, but no!—you cannot afford to chase me yet. I have to find more papers of baptisms and burials. Go, then, we will talk of this affair as friends."

This friendly talk ended in Captain Paget's complete victory. M. Fleurus consented to accept his costs out of pocket in the present, and three per cent. of the heritage in the future. It was further agreed that the Captain should select the English attorney who should conduct M. Lenoble's case in the Court of Chancery.

This conversation occurred at Rouen, and a day or two afterwards the necessary document was drawn up. Gustave pledged himself to pay over a fourth share of the Haygarthian fortune to Horatio Paget, and three per cent. upon the whole amount to Jean François Fleurus. The document was very formal, very complete; but whether such an agreement would hold water, if Gustave Lenoble should choose to contest it, was open to question.

She solicitor to whom Horatio Paget introduced M. Lenoble was a Mr. Dashwood, of the firm of Dashwood and Vernon; a man whom the Captain had known in the past, and from whom he had received good service in some of the most difficult crises of his difficult career. To this gentleman he confided the conduct of the case; and explained his apprehensions with regard to the two Sheldons.

"You see, as the case now stands, they think they have the claimant to this money in Miss Halliday—Sheldon's stepdaughter. But if they got an inkling of Susan Meynell's marriage—and, in point of fact—the actual state of the case—they might try to get hold of my friend, Gustave Lenoble. They could *not* get hold of him, mind you, Dashwood, but they would try it on, and I don't want trying on of that kind."

"Of course not. I know Sheldon, of Gray's Inn. He is

rather—well, say *shady*. That's hardly an actionable epithet, and it expresses what I mean. Your friend's case seems to me tolerably clear. That little Frenchman is useful, but officious. It is not a speculative affair, I suppose? There is money to meet the current expenses of the business?"

"Yes, there is money. Within reasonable limits my friend is prepared to pay for the advancement of his claims."

After this the Haygarthian business progressed, slowly, quietly. The work was up to this point underground work. There were still papers wanting—final links of the chain to be fitted together; and to the fitting of these links Messrs. Dash- and Vernon devoted themselves, in conjunction with M. Fleurus.

This was how matters stood when Captain Paget drooped and languished, and was fain to abandon all active share in the struggle.

CHAPTER II.

FADING.

While the invalid in the pleasant lodgings overlooking Hyde Park grew day by day weaker, there was a change as marked in the bright young creature whose loving spirit had first brought the influence of affection to bear upon Diana Paget's character. Charlotte Halliday was ill—very ill. It was with everyday increasing anxiety that Diana watched the slow change—slow in its progress, but awfully rapid to look back upon. The pain, the regret, with which she noted her father's decay were little indeed compared with the sharp agony which rent her heart as she perceived the alteration in this dear friend, the blighting of this fair young flower.

That the withered leaves of autumn should fall is sad, but natural, and we submit to the gloomy inevitable fact of decay and death. But to see our rose of roses, the pride and glory of the garden, fade and perish in its midsummer prime, is a calamity inexplicable and mysterious. Diana watched her father's decline with a sense of natural sorrow and pity; but there was neither surprise nor horror in the thought that for him the end of all things was drawing nigh. How different was it with Charlotte—with that happy soul for whom life and love wore their brightest smile, before whose light joyous footsteps stretched so fair a pathway!

The illness, whatever it was—and neither Mr. Sheldon nor the portly and venerable physician whom he called in could find a name for it—crept upon the patient with stealthy and insidious steps. Dizziness, trembling, faintness; trembling, faintness, dizziness; the symptoms alternated day by day. Sometimes

there was a respite of a few days; and Charlotte—the youthful, the sanguine, the happy—declared that her enemy had left her.

"I am sure mamma is right, Di," she said on these occasions. "My nerves are the beginning and end of the mischief; and if I could get the better of my nerves, I should be as well as ever. I don't wonder that the idea of my symptoms makes mamma almost cross. You see, she has been accustomed to have the symptoms all to herself; and for me to plagiarise them, as it were, must seem quite an impertinence. For a strong young thing like me, you know, Di dear—who have only just broken myself of plunging downstairs two and three steps at a time, and plunging upstairs in the same vulgar manner—to intrude on mamma's shattered nerves, and pirate mamma's low spirits, is utterly absurd and abominable; so I have resolved to look my nerves straight in the face, and get the better of them."

"My darling, you will get the better of them if you try," said Diana, who did at times beguile herself with the hope that her friend's ailments were mental rather than bodily. "I dare say your monotonous life has something to do with your altered health; you want change of scene, dear."

"Change of scene, when I have you and Valentine! No, Di. It would certainly be very nice to have the background shifted now and then; to see Capability Brown's prim gardens melt into Alpine heights or southern vineyards, or even into Russian steppes or Hungarian forests. One does get a little tired of *toujours* Bayswater; and Mr. Sheldon; and crimped skate; and sirloin of beef, and the inevitable discussion as to whether it is in a cannibal state of rawness or burnt to a cinder; and the glasses of pale sherry; and the red worsted doyleys and blue finger-glasses; and the almonds and raisins, and crisp biscuits, that nobody ever eats; and the dreary, dreary funereal business of dinner, when we all talk vapid nonsense, with an ever-present consciousness of the parlourmaid. I am tired of the dull dinners, and of mamma's peevish complaints about Ann Woolper's ascendancy downstairs; and of Mr. Sheldon's perpetual newspapers, that crackle, crackle, crackle all the evening through; and *such* papers!—*Money Market Monitor, Stockholder's Vade-Mecum*, and all sorts of dreadful things of that kind, with not so much as an interesting advertisement in one of them. I used never to feel these things an annoyance, you know, dear, till I made the acquaintance of my nerves; but from the moment I allowed my nerves to get the better of me, all these trifles have worried and excruciated me. But I am happy with you, darling; and I am happy with Valentine. Poor Valentine!"

She pronounced his name with a sigh; and then, after a pause, repeated mournfully, "Poor Valentine!"

"Why do you speak of him so sadly, dear?" asked Diana, very pale.

"Because—because we have planned such a happy life together, dear, and——"

"Is that a thing to be sad about, darling?"

"And—if it should happen, after all, that we have to part, and he go on alone, the world may seem so sad and lonely to him."

"Charlotte!" cried Diana, with a laugh that was almost choked by a sob, "is this looking your nerves in the face? Why, my dear one, this is indeed plagiarism of your mamma's low spirits. Lotta, you shall have change of air; yes, I am determined on that. The stately physician who came in his carriage the other day, and who looked at your tongue, and said 'Ah!' and then felt your pulse and said 'Ah!' again, and then called for pen-and-ink and wrote a little prescription, is not the doctor we want for you. We want Dr. Yorkshire; we want the breezes from the Yorkshire moors, and the smell of the farmyard, and our dear Aunt Dorothy's sillabubs, and our uncle Joe to take us for long walks across his clover-fields."

"I don't want to go to Newhall, Di. I couldn't bear to leave —him."

"But what is to prevent your meeting *him* at the white gate this time, as you met him last October? Might not accident take *him* to Huxter's Cross again? The archæological work—of which we have heard no more, by the bye—might necessitate further investigations in that district. If you will go to Newhall, Lotta, I will pledge myself for Mr. Hawkehurst's speedy appearance at the white gate you have so often described to me."

"My dearest Di, you are all kindness; but even if I were inclined to go to Newhall, I doubt if mamma or Mr. Sheldon would like me to go."

"I am sure they would be pleased with any arrangement that was likely to benefit your health. But I will talk to your mamma about it. I have set my heart on your going to Newhall."

Miss Paget lost no time in carrying out her idea. She took possession of Georgy that afternoon, while teaching her a new stitch in *tricot*, and succeeded in impressing her with the conviction that change of air was necessary for Charlotte.

"But you don't think Lotta really ill?" asked Mrs. Sheldon, nervously.

"I trust she is not really ill, dear Mrs. Sheldon; but I am sure she is much changed. In talking to her, I affect to think that her illness is only an affair of the nerves; but I sadly fear that it is something more than that."

"But what is the matter with her?" exclaimed Georgy, with a piteous air of perplexity; "that is the question which I am always asking. People can't be ill, you know, Diana, without having something the matter with them; and that is what I can't make out in Charlotte's case. Mr. Sheldon says she wants tone; the physician who came in a carriage and pair, and ought to know what he is talking about, says there is a lack of vigour. But what does that all amount to? I'm sure I've wanted tone all my life. Perhaps there never was a creature so devoid of tone as I am; and the internal sinking I feel just before luncheon is something that no one but myself can realize. I dare say Lotta is not so strong as she might be; but I do not see that she can be ill, unless her illness is something definite. My poor first husband's illness, now, was the kind of thing that any one could understand—bilious fever. The merest child knows what it is to be bilious, and the merest child knows what it is to be feverish. There can be nothing mysterious in bilious fever."

"But, dear Mrs. Sheldon," said Diana, gravely, "don't you think that the weakness of constitution which rendered Charlotte's father liable to be taken off in the prime of life by a fever is a weakness that Charlotte may possibly have inherited?"

"Good heavens, Diana!" cried Georgy, with sudden terror; "you don't mean to say that you think my Charlotte is going to die?"

It was but one step with Mrs. Sheldon from peevish incredulity to frantic alarm; and Diana found it as difficult to tranquillise her newly-awakened fears as it had been to rouse her from absolute apathy.

Change of air—yes, of course—Charlotte must have change of air that instant. Let a cab be sent for immediately to take them to the terminus. Change of air, of course. To Newhall—to Nice—to the Isle of Wight—to Malta; Mrs. Sheldon had heard of people going to Malta. Where should they go? Would Diana advise, and send for a cab, and pack a travelling bag without an instant's delay? The rest of the things could be sent afterwards. What did luggage matter, when Charlotte's life was at stake?

At this point a flood of tears happily relieved poor Georgy's excited feelings, and then common sense and Diana Paget came to the rescue.

"My dear Mrs. Sheldon," she said, with a quiet cheerful tone that went far to reassure the excited lady, "in the first place we must, above all things, refrain from any appearance of alarm. Her illness may, after all, be only an affair of the nerves; and there is certainly no cause for immediate fear."

Georgy was tranquillised, and agreed to take matters quietly.

She promised to arrange Charlotte's departure for Newhall, with Mr. Sheldon, that evening.

"Of course, you know, my dear, I like to consult him about everything,' she said, apologetically. "It is a duty which one owes one's husband, you know, and a duty which, as a young woman about to marry, I cannot too much impress upon you; but in this case it is quite a matter of form: Mr. Sheldon never has objected to Charlotte's going to Newhall, and he is not likely to object now."

The event proved Mrs. Sheldon mistaken as to this matter. Georgy proposed the visit to Newhall that evening, while the two girls were strolling listlessly in the dusky garden, and Mr. Sheldon most decidedly rejected the proposition.

"If she wants change of air—and Dr. Doddleson recommended nothing of the kind—Newhall is not the place for her."

"Why not, dear?"

"It is too cold. Northerly aspect—no shelter—three hundred feet above York minster."

"But Dorothy Mercer is such a kind motherly creature; she'd delight in nursing Lotta."

"Yes," answered Mr. Sheldon, with a laugh, "and in quacking her. I know what those good motherly creatures are when they get an excuse for dosing some unhappy victim with their quack nostrums. If Charlotte went to Newhall, Mrs. Mercer would poi—— would make her ten times worse than she is with old woman's remedies. Besides, as I said before, the place is too cold. That is a conclusive argument, I suppose?"

He said this with some impatience of tone and manner. There was a haggard look in his face, a hurried harassed manner pervading him this evening, which had been growing upon him of late. Georgy was too slow of perception to remark this; but Diana Paget had remarked it, and had attributed the change in the stockbroker's manner to a blending of two anxieties.

"He is anxious about money matters," she had said to herself, "and he is anxious about Charlotte's health. His lips, moving in whispered calculations, as he sits brooding by the fire, tell me of the first anxiety; his eyes, wandering furtively to his stepdaughter's face every now and then, tell me of the second."

This furtive anxiety of Mr. Sheldon's increased Diana Paget's anxiety. This man, who had a certain amount of medical knowledge, could no doubt read the diagnostics of that strange insidious illness, which had, as yet, no name, Diana, furtively watching his furtive looks, told herself that he read of danger.

"If Charlotte wants change of air, let her go to Hastings," he said; "that is the kind of place for an invalid. I want rest myself; and there's such utter stagnation in the City nowadays

that I can very well afford to give myself a holiday. We'll run down to Hastings, or the immediate neighbourhood of Hastings, for a week or two."

"O Philip, how kind and considerate you are! I am sure, as I was observing to Miss Paget only to-day, you——"

"Ah, by the bye, there's Miss Paget. Is it absolutely necessary that Miss Paget should go to Hastings with us?"

"Well, dear, you see she has so kindly desired to remain with me for the quarter, so as to give me time to turn round, you know, with regard to caps and summer things, and so on—for, really, she has such taste, and does strike out such excellent ideas about turning, and dipping, and dyeing, that I don't know what will become of me when she leaves us; and it would look so pointed to ——"

"Yes; she had better go with us. But why all this fuss about Charlotte? Who put it into your head that she wants change of air?"

Mr. Sheldon evidently considered it an established fact that any idea in his wife's head must needs have been put there by some one or other.

"Well, you see, Diana and I were talking of Lotta this afternoon, and Diana quite alarmed me."

"How so?" asked Mr. Sheldon, with a quick frown.

"Why, she said it was evident, by the fact of poor dear Tom's dying of a fever, that his constitution must have been originally weak. And she said that perhaps Charlotte had inherited Tom's weak constitution—and frightened me dreadfully."

"There is no occasion for you to be frightened; Charlotte will get on very well, I dare say, with care. But Miss Paget is a very sensible young woman, and is right in what she says. Charlotte's constitution is not strong."

"O Philip!" said Georgy, in a faint wailing voice.

"I dare say she will live to follow you and me to our graves," said Mr. Sheldon, with a hard laugh. "Ah, here she is!"

Here she was, coming towards the open window near which her stepfather sat. Here she was, pale and tired, with her sauntering walk, dressed in white, and spectral in the gloaming. To the sad eyes of her mother she looked like a ghost. To the eyes of Philip Sheldon, a man not prone to poetic fancies, she looked even more ghostlike.

CHAPTER III.

MRS. WOOLPER IS ANXIOUS.

SINCE the beginning of her illness, Charlotte Halliday had been the object and subject of many anxious thoughts in the minds of several people. That her stepfather had his anxieties about her—anxieties which he tried to hide—was obvious to the one person in the Bayswater villa who noted his looks, and tried to read the thoughts they indicated.

Mrs. Sheldon's alarm, once fairly awakened, was not to be lulled to rest. And in Valentine Hawkehurst's heart there was an aching pain—a dull dead load of care, which had never been lightened from the hour when he first perceived the change in his dear one's face.

There was one other person, an inhabitant of the Bayswater villa, who watched Charlotte Halliday at this time with a care as unresting as the care of mother or stepfather, bosom friend or plighted lover. This person was Ann Woolper. Mrs. Woolper had come to the villa prepared to find in Miss Halliday a frivolous self-satisfied young person, between whom and an old broken-down woman like herself there could be no sympathy. She had expected to be contemptuously—or, at the best, indifferently—entreated by the prosperous well-placed young lady, whom Mr. Sheldon had spoken of as a good girl, as girls go; a vague species of commendation, which, to the mind of Mrs. Woolper, promised very little.

As clearly as Philip Sheldon dared express his wishes with regard to Charlotte Halliday, he had expressed them to Ann Woolper. What he would fain have said, was, "Watch my stepdaughter, and keep me well acquainted with every step she takes." Thus much he dared not say; but by insinuating that Tom Halliday's daughter was frivolous and reckless, and that her lover was not to be trusted, he had contrived to put Mrs. Woolper on the *qui vive*.

"Mr. Philip's afraid she may go and marry this young man on the sly, before he's got the means to support a wife," she said to herself, as she meditated upon the meaning of her master's injunctions; "and well he may be. There's no knowing what young women are up to nowadays; and the more innocent and inexperienced a young woman is, the more she wants looking after. And Miss Georgy Craddock always was a poor fondy, up to naught but dressing herself fine, and streaming up and down Barlingford High Street with her old schoolfellows. Such as she ain't fit to be trusted with a daughter; and Mr. Philip knows that. He always was a deep one. But I'm glad he looks

after Missy: there's many men, having got fast hold of th' father's brass, would let th' daughter marry Old Scratch, for the sake of gettin' rid of her."

This is how Mrs. Woolper argued the matter. She came of a prudent race; and anything like prudence seemed to her a commendable virtue. She wished to think well of her master; for her he had been a Providence in the hour of calamity and old age. Where else could she look, if not to him? And to suspect him, or think ill of him, was to reject the one refuge offered to her distress. A magnanimous independence of spirit is not an easy virtue for the old and friendless and poor. The drowning wretch will scarcely question the soundness of the plank that sustains him upon the storm-tossed billows; nor was Mrs. Woolper inclined to question the motives of the man to whom she now owed her daily bread.

It is possible that before invoking Mrs. Woolper from the ashes of the past to take her seat by the hearthstone of the present, Mr. Sheldon may have contemplated the question of her return in all its bearings, and may have assured himself that she was his own, by a tie not easily broken—his bond-slave, fettered hand and foot by the bondage of necessity.

"What choice can she have, except the choice between my house and the workhouse?" he may naturally have asked himself; "and is it likely she will quarrel with her bread-and-butter in order to fall back upon dry bread?" Mr. Sheldon, contemplating this and all other questions from his one unchanging standpoint, may reasonably have concluded that Mrs. Woolper would do nothing opposed to her own interests; and that so long as it suited her interest to remain at the Lawn, and to serve him, she would there remain, his docile and unquestioning slave.

The influence of affection, the force of generous impulse, were qualities that did not come into Mr. Sheldon's calculations upon this subject. His addition and subtraction, division and multiplication, were all based on one system.

That happy and unconscious art by which Charlotte Halliday made herself dear to all who knew her had a speedy effect upon the old housekeeper. The girl's amiable consideration for her age and infirmities; the pretty affectionate familiarity with which she treated this countrywoman, who had known her father, and who could talk to her of Yorkshire and Yorkshire people, soon made their way to Nancy Woolper's heart of hearts. For Miss Halliday to come to the housekeeper's room with some message from her mother, and to linger for a few minutes' chat, was a delight to Mrs. Woolper. She would have detained the bright young visitant for hours instead of minutes, if she could have found any excuse for so doing. Nor was there any treason

against Mr. Sheldon in her growing attachment to his step-daughter. Whenever Nancy spoke of that master and benefactor, she spoke with unfeigned gratitude and affection.

"I nursed your step-papa as a baby, Miss Halliday," she said very often on these occasions. "You wouldn't think, to look at him now, that he ever was *that*, would you? But he was one of the finest babies you could wish to see—tall, and strong, and with eyes that pierced one through, they were so bright and big and black. He was rather stubborn-spirited with his teething; but what baby isn't trying at such times? I had rare work with him, I can tell you, Miss, walking him about of nights, and jogging him till there wasn't a jog left in me, as you may say, from sleepiness. I often wonder if he thinks of this now, when I see him looking so grave and stern. But, you see, being jogged doesn't impress the mind like having to jog; and though I can bring that time back as plain as if it was yesterday, with the very nursery I slept in at Barlingford, and the rushlight in a tall iron cage on the floor, and the shadow of the cage on the bare whitewashed walls—it's clean gone out of his mind, I dare say."

"I'm afraid it has, Nancy."

"But, O, I was fond of him, Miss Halliday; and what I went through with him about his teeth made me only the fonder of him. He was the first baby I ever nursed, you see, and the last; for before Master George came to town I'd taken to the cooking, and Mrs. Sheldon hired another girl as nurse; a regular softy *she* was, and it isn't her fault that Master George has got anything christian-like in the way of a back, for the way she carried that blessed child used to make my blood run cold."

Thus would Mrs. Woolper discourse whenever she had a fair excuse for detaining Miss Halliday in her comfortable apartment. Charlotte did not perceive much interest in these reminiscences of Mr. Sheldon's infancy, but she was much too kind to bring them abruptly to a close by any show of impatience. When she could get Nancy to talk of Barlingford and Hyley, and the people whom Charlotte herself had known as a child, the conversation was really interesting; and these recollections formed a link between the old woman and the fair young damsel.

When the change arose in Charlotte's health and spirits, Mrs. Woolper was one of the first to perceive it. She was skilled in those old woman's remedies which Mr. Sheldon held in such supreme contempt, and she would fain have dosed the invalid with nauseous decoctions of hops, or home-brewed quinine. Charlotte appreciated the kindness of the intent, but she rebelled against the home-brewed medicines, and pinned her faith to the more scientific and less obnoxious preparations procured from the chemist's.

For some time Nancy made light of the girl's ailments, though she watched her with unfailing attention.

"You ain't a-done growing yet, miss, I'll lay," she said.

"But I'm more than twenty-one, Nancy. People don't grow after they're of age, do they?"

"I've known them as have, miss; I don't say it's common, but it has been done. And then there's the weakness that comes after you've done growing. Girls of your age are apt to be faint and lollopy-like, as you may say; especially when they're stived up in a smoky place like London. You ought to go to Hyley, miss, where you was born; that's the place to set you up."

The time had come when the change was no longer matter for doubt. Day by day Charlotte grew weaker and paler; day by day that bright and joyous creature, whose presence had made an atmosphere of youth and gladness even in that prim dwelling-place, receded farther into the dimness of the past; until to think of what she had been seemed like recalling the image of the dead. Nancy marked the alteration with a strange pain, so sharp, so bitter, that its sharpness and bitterness were a perpetual perplexity to her.

"If the poor dear young thing is meant to go, there's no need for *me* to fret about it all day long, and wake up sudden in the night with cold water standing out upon my forehead at the thought of it. I haven't known her six months; and if she is pretty and sweet-spoken, it's not my place to give way at the thoughts of losing her. She's not my own flesh and blood; and I've sat by to watch *them* go, times and often, without feeling as I do when I see the change in her day after day. Why should it seem so dreadful to me?"

Why indeed? This was a question for which Mrs. Woolper could find no answer. She knew that the pain and horror which she felt were something more than natural, but beyond this point her thoughts refused to travel. A superstitious feeling arose at this point, to usurp the office of reason, and she accounted for the strangeness of Miss Halliday's illness as she might have done had she lived in the sixteenth century, and been liable to the suspicion of nocturnal careerings on broomsticks.

"I'm sorry Mr. Philip's house should be unlucky to that sweet young creature," she said to herself. "It was unlucky to the father; and now it seems as if it was going to be unlucky to the daughter. And Mr. Philip won't be any richer for her death. Mrs. Sheldon has told me times and often that all Tom Halliday's money went to my master when she married him, and he has doubled and trebled it by his cleverness. Miss Charlotte's death wouldn't bring him a sixpence."

This was the gist of Mrs. Woolper's meditations very often nowadays. But the strange sense of perplexity, the nameless

fear, the vague horror, were not to be banished from her mind. A sense of some shapeless presence for ever at her side haunted her by day and night. What was it? What did its presence portend? It was as if a figure, shrouded from head to foot, was there, dark and terrible, at her elbow, and she would not turn to meet the horror face to face. Sometimes the phantom hand lifted a corner of the veil, and the shade said, "Look at me! See who and what I am! You have seen me before. I am here again! and this time you shall not refuse to meet me face to face! I am the shadow of the horror you suspected in the past!"

The shadowy fears which oppressed Mrs. Woolper during this period did not in any way lessen her practical usefulness. From the commencement of Charlotte's slow decline she had shown herself attentive, and even officious, in all matters relating to the invalid. With her own hands she decanted the famous port which Georgy fetched from the particular bin in Mr. Sheldon's carefully arranged cellar. When the physician was called in, and wrote his harmless little prescription, it was Mrs. Woolper who carried the document to the dispensing chemist, and brought back the innocent potion, which might, peradventure, effect some slight good, and was too feeble a decoction to do any harm. Charlotte duly appreciated all this kindness; but she repeatedly assured the housekeeper that her ailments were not worthy of so much care.

It was Mrs. Woolper whom Mr. Sheldon employed to get lodgings for the family, when it had been ultimately decided that a change to the seaside was the best cure for Miss Halliday.

"I am too busy to go to Hastings myself this week," he said; "but I shall be prepared to spend a fortnight there after next Monday. What I want you to do, Nancy, is to slip down to-morrow, with a second-class return-ticket, and look about for a nice place for us. I don't care about being in Hastings; there's too much cockneyism in the place at this time of year. There's a little village called Harold's Hill, within a mile or so of St. Leonard's—a dull, out-of-the-way place, but rustic and picturesque, and all that kind of thing—the sort of place that women like. Now, I'd rather stay at that place than at Hastings. So you can take a fly at the station, drive straight to Harold's Hill, and secure the best lodgings you can get."

"You think as the change of air will do Miss Halliday good?" asked Mrs. Woolper anxiously, after she had promised to do all her kind master required of her.

"Do I think it will do her good? Of course I do. Sea-air and sea bathing will set her up in no time; there's nothing particular the matter with her."

"No, Mr. Philip; that's what bothers me about the whole thing. There's nothing particular the matter with her; and yet she pines and dwindles, and dwindles and pines, till it makes one's heart ache to see her."

Philip Sheldon's face darkened, and he threw himself back in his chair with an impatient movement. If he had chosen to do so, he could have prevented that darkening of his face; but he did not consider Mrs. Woolper a person of sufficient importance to necessitate the regulation of his countenance. What was she but an ignorant, obstinate old woman, who would most probably perish in the streets if he chose to turn her out of doors? There are men who consider their clerks and retainers such very dirt, that they would continue the forging of a bill of exchange, or complete the final touches of a murder, with a junior clerk putting coals on the fire, or an errand-boy standing cap in hand on the threshold of the door. They cannot realize the fact that dirt such as this is flesh and blood, and may denounce them by-and-by in a witness-box.

Of all contingencies Mr. Sheldon least expected that this old woman could prove troublesome to him—this abject wretch, whose daily bread depended on his will. He could not imagine that there are circumstances under which such abject creatures will renounce their daily bread, and die of hunger, rather than accept the means of life from one hateful hand.

"If you want to know anything about Miss Halliday's illness," he said in his hardest voice, and with his hardest look, "you had better apply to Dr. Doddleson, the physician who has prescribed for her. I do not attend her, you see, and I am in no way responsible for her health. When I was attending her father you favoured me by doubting my skill, if I judged rightly as to your tone and manner on one occasion. I don't want to be brought to book by you, Mrs. Woolper, about Miss Halliday's altered looks or Miss Halliday's illness; I have nothing to do with either."

"How should I think you had, sir? Don't be angry with me, or hard upon me, Mr. Phil. I nursed you when you was but a baby, and you're nearer and dearer to me than any other master could be. Why, I have but to shut my eyes now, and I can feel your little hand upon my neck, as it used to lie there, so soft and dear. And then I look down at the hand on the table, strong and dark, and clenched so firm, and I ask myself, Can it be the same? For the sake of that time, Mr. Phil, don't be hard upon me. There's nothing I wouldn't do to serve you; there's nothing you could do that would turn me from you. There's no man living in this world, sir, that oughtn't to be glad to know of one person that nothing can turn from him."

"That's a very fine sentiment, my good soul," replied Mr.

Sheldon coolly; "but, you see, it's only an *ex parte* statement; and as the case stands there is no opportunity for the display of those fine feelings you talk about. You happen to want a home in your old age, and I happen to be able to give you a home. Under such circumstances, your own good sense will show you that all sentimental talk about standing by *me*, and not turning away from me, is absolute bosh."

The old woman sighed heavily. She had offered her master a fidelity which involved the abnegation of all impulses of her own heart and mind, and he rejected her love and her service. And then, after the first dreary sense of his coldness, she felt better pleased that it should be so. The man who spoke to her in this harsh uncompromising way could have no cause to fear her. In the mind of such a man there could surely be no secret chamber within which she had, with his knowledge, almost penetrated.

"I won't trouble you any more, sir," she said mournfully. "I dare say I'm a foolish old woman."

"You are, Nancy. We don't get wiser as we grow older, you see; and when we let our tongues wag, we're apt to talk nonsense. The quieter you keep your tongue, the better for yourself, in more ways than one. To a useful old woman about the place I've no objection; but a chattering old woman I will not have at any price."

After this everything was settled in the most agreeable manner. Nancy Woolper's journey to Hastings was fully arranged; and early the next morning she started, brisk and active, in spite of her sixty-eight years of age. She returned at night, having secured very pleasant lodgings at the village of Harold's Hill.

"And a very sweet place it is, my dear Miss Lotta," she said to Charlotte the next day, when she described her adventures. "The apartments are at a farmhouse overlooking the sea; and the smell of the cows under your windows, and the sea-breezes blowing across the farmyard, can't fail to bring the colour back to your pretty cheeks, and the brightness back to your pretty eyes."

CHAPTER IV.

VALENTINE'S SKELETON.

The idea of this visit to the Sussex village by the sea seemed delightful to every one except Gustave Lenoble, who was still in town and who thought it a hard thing that he should be

deprived of Diana's society during an entire fortnight, for the sake of this sickly Miss Halliday.

For the rest, there was hope and gladness in the thought of this change of dwelling. Charlotte languished for fresher breezes and more rustic prospects than the breezes and prospects of Bayswater; Diana looked to the sea-air as the doctor of doctors for her fading friend; and Valentine cherished the same hope.

On Valentine Hawkehurst the burden of an unlooked-for sorrow had weighed very heavily. To see this dear girl, who was the beginning, middle, and end of all his hopes, slowly fading before his eyes, was, of all agonies that could have fallen to his lot, the sharpest and most bitter. Not Ugolino sitting silent amidst his famishing children—not Helen, when she would fain that the tempest had swept her from earth's surface on that evil day when she was born—not Penelope, when she cried on Diana, the high-priestess of death, to release her from the weariness of her days—not Agamemnon, when the fatal edict had gone forth, and his fair young daughter looked into his face, and asked him if it was true that she was to die—not one of these typical mourners could have suffered a keener torture than that which rent this young man's heart, as he marked the stealthy steps of the Destroyer drawing nearer and nearer the woman he loved. Of all possible calamities, this was the last he had ever contemplated. Sometimes, in moments of doubt or despondency, he had thought it possible that poverty, the advice of friends, caprice or inconstancy on the part of Charlotte herself, should sever them. But among the possible enemies to his happiness he had never counted Death. What had Death to do with so fair and happy a creature as Charlotte Halliday? she who, until some two months before this time, might have been the divine Hygieia in person—so fresh was her youthful bloom, so buoyant her step, so bright her glances. Valentine's hardest penance was the necessity for the concealment of his anxiety. The idea that Charlotte's illness might be—nay, must be—for the greater part an affair of the nerves was always paramount in his mind. He and Diana had talked of the subject together whenever they found an opportunity for so doing, and had comforted themselves with the assurance that the nerves alone were to blame; and they were the more inclined to think this from the conduct of Dr. Doddleson, on that physician's visits to Miss Halliday. Mrs. Sheldon had been present on each occasion, and to Mrs. Sheldon alone had the physician given utterance to his opinion of the case. That opinion, though expressed with a certain amount of professional dignity, amounted to very little. "Our dear young friend wanted strength; and what we had to do was to give our dear young

friend strength—vital power. Yes—er—um, that was the chief point. And what kind of diet might our dear young friend take now? Was it a light diet, a little roast mutton—not too much done, but not underdone? O dear, no. And a light pudding? what he would call—if he might be permitted to have his little joke—a nursery pudding." And then the old gentleman had indulged in a senile chuckle, and patted Charlotte's head with his fat old fingers. "And our dear young friend's room, now, was it a large room?—good! and what was the aspect now, south?—good again! nothing better, unless, perhaps, south-west; but, of course, everyone's rooms can't look south-west. A little tonic draught, and gentle daily exercise in that nice garden, will set our dear young friend right again. Our temperament is nervous we are a sensitive plant, and want care." And then the respectable septuagenarian took his fee, and shuffled off to his carriage. And this was all that Mrs. Sheldon could tell Diana, or Nancy Woolper, both of whom questioned her closely about her interview with the doctor. To Diana and to Valentine there was hope to be gathered from the very vagueness of the physician's opinion. If there had been anything serious the matter, the medical adviser must needs have spoken more seriously. He came again and again. He found the pulse a little weaker, the patient a little more nervous, with a slight tendency to hysteria, and so on; but he still declared that there were no traces of organic disease, and he still talked of Miss Halliday's ailments with a cheery easy-going manner that was very reassuring.

In his moments of depression Valentine pinned his faith upon Dr. Doddleson. Without organic disease, he told himself, his darling could not perish. He looked for Dr. Doddleson's name in the Directory, and took comfort from the fact of that physician's residence in a fashionable West End square. He took further comfort from the splendour of the doctor's equipage, as depicted to him by Mrs. Sheldon; and from the doctor's age and experience, as copiously described by the same lady.

"There is only one fact that I have ever reproached myself with in relation to my poor Tom,' 'said Georgy, who, in talking to strangers of her first husband, was apt to impress them with the idea that she was talking of a favourite cat; "and that is, the youthfulness of the doctor Mr. Sheldon employed. Of course I am well aware that Mr. Sheldon would not have consulted the young man if he had not thought him clever; but I could lay my head upon my pillow at night with a clearer conscience if poor Tom's doctor had been an older and more experienced person. Now, that's what I like about Dr. Doddleson. There's a gravity—a weight—about a man of that age which inspires one with immediate confidence. I'm sure the

serious manner with which he questioned me about Lotta's diet, and the aspect of her room, was quite delightful."

In Dr. Doddleson, under Providence, Valentine was fain to put his trust. He did not know that the worthy doctor was one of those harmless inanities who, by the aid of money and powerful connections, are sometimes forced into a position which nature never intended them to occupy. Among the real working men of that great and admirable brotherhood, the medical profession, Dr. Doddleson had no rank; but he was the pet physician of fashionable dowagers suffering from chronic laziness or periodical attacks of ill-humour. For the spleen or the vapours no one was a better adviser than Dr. Doddleson. He could afford to waste half an hour upon the asking of questions which the fair patient's maid might as well have asked, and the suggestions of remedies which any intelligent abigail could as easily have suggested. Elderly ladies believed in him because he was pompous and ponderous, lived in an expensive neighbourhood, and drove a handsome equipage. He wore mourning-rings left him by patients who never had anything particular the matter with them, and who, dying of sheer old age, or sheer over-eating, declared with their final gasp that Dr. Doddleson had been the guardian angel of their frail lives during the last twenty years.

This was the man who, of all the medical profession resident in London, Mr. Sheldon had selected as his stepdaughter's medical adviser in a case so beyond common experience, that a man of wide practice and keen perception was especially needed for its treatment.

Dr. Doddleson, accustomed to attribute the fancied ailments of fashionable dowagers to want of tone, and accustomed to prescribe the mildest preparations with satisfaction to his patients and profit to himself, dwelt upon the same want of tone, and prescribed the same harmless remedies, in his treatment of Charlotte Halliday. When he found her no better—nay, even worse—after some weeks of this treatment, he was puzzled; and for one harmless remedy he substituted another harmless remedy, and waited another week to see what effect the second harmless remedy might have on this somewhat obstinate young person.

And this was the broken reed to which Valentine clung in the day of his trouble.

Bitter were his days and sleepless were his nights in this dark period of his existence. He went to the Bayswater villa nearly every day now. It was no longer time for etiquette or ceremony. His darling was fading day by day; and it was his right to watch the slow sad change, and, if it were possible, to keep the enemy at arm's-length. Every day he came to spend one too brief hour with his dear love; every day he greeted her with the

same fond smile, and beguiled her with the same hopeful talk. He brought her new books and flowers, and any foolish trifle which he fancied might beguile her thoughts from the contemplation of that mysterious malady which seemed beyond the reach of science and Dr. Doddleson. He sat and talked with her of the future—that future which in their secret thoughts both held to be a sweet sad fable—the hyperborean garden of their dreams. And after spending this too sweet, too bitter hour with his beloved, Mr. Hawkehurst would diplomatise in order to have a little talk with Diana as he left the house. Did Diana think his dear girl better to-day, or worse—surely not worse? He had fancied she had more colour, more of her old gaiety of manner. She had seemed a little feverish; but that might be the excitement of his visit. And so on, and so on, with sad and dreary repetition.

And then, having gone away from that house with an aching heart, the young magazine-writer went back to his lodgings, and plunged into the dashing essay or the smart pleasant story which was to constitute his monthly contribution to the *Cheapside* or the *Charing Cross*. Gaiety, movement, rollicking, Harry Lorrequer-like spirits were demanded for the *Cheapside;* a graceful union of brilliancy and depth was required for the *Charing Cross*. And, O, be sure the critics lay in wait to catch the young scribbler tripping! An anachronism here, a secondhand idea there, and the *West End Wasp* shrieked its war-whoop in an occasional note; or the *Minerva* published a letter from a correspondent in the Scilly Islands, headed "Another Literary Jack Sheppard," to say that in his "Imperial Dictionary" he had discovered with profound indignation a whole column of words feloniously and mendaciously appropriated by the writer of such and such an article in the *Cheapside*. While the sunlight of hope had shone upon him, Mr. Hawkehurst had found the hardest work pleasant. Was he not working for *her* sake? Did not his future union with that dear girl depend upon his present industry? It had seemed to him as if she stood at his elbow while he wrote, as Pallas stood beside Achilles at the council, invisible to all but her favourite. It was that mystic presence which lent swiftness to his pen. When he was tired and depressed, the thought of Charlotte had revived his courage and vanquished his fatigue. Pleasant images crowded upon him when he thought of her. What could be easier than for him to write a love-story? He had but to create a shadowy Charlotte for his heroine, and the stream of foolish lover's babble flowed from his pen perennial and inexhaustible. To his reading she lent a charm and a grace that made the most perfect poetry still more poetical. It was not Achilles and Helen who met on Mount Ida, but Valentine and Charlotte; it was not Paolo and Francesca who read the

fatal book together, but Valentine and Charlotte, in an unregenerate and mediæval state of mind. The mere coincidence of a name made the "Sorrows of Werter" delightful. The all-pervading presence was everywhere and in everything. His religion was not Pantheism, but Charlottism.

Now all was changed. A brooding care was with him in every moment. The mystic presence was still close to him in every hour of his lonely days and nights; but that image, which had been fair and blooming as the incarnation of youth and spring-time, was now a pale shrouded phantom which he dared not contemplate. He still wrote on—for it is marvellous how the pen will travel and the mind will project itself into the shadow-world of fancy while cankerous care gnaws the weary heart. Nay, it is perhaps at these times that the imagination is most active; for the world of shadows is a kind of refuge for the mind that dare not dwell upon realities. Who can say what dull, leaden care may have weighed down the heart of William Shakespeare when his mind conceived that monster of a poet's grand imaginings, Othello! There is the flavour of racking care in that mighty creation. The strong soul wantonly tortured by a sordid wretch; the noble spirit distraught, the honourable life wrecked for so poor a motive; that sense of the "something in this world amiss," which the poet, of all other creatures, feels most keenly.

With grief and fear as his constant companions, Valentine Hawkehurst toiled on bravely, patiently. Hope had not deserted him; but between hope and fear the contest was unceasing. Sometimes hope had the best of it for a while, and the toiler comforted himself with the thought that this dark cloud would pass anon from the horizon of his life; and then he counted his gains, and found that the fruit of his labours was increasing monthly, as his name gained rank among the band of young *littérateurs*. The day when he might count upon that income which Mr. Sheldon demanded as his qualification for matrimony did not appear far distant. Given a certain amount of natural ability, and the industrious and indefatigable young writer may speedily emerge from obscurity, and take his place in the great army of those gallant soldiers whose only weapon is the pen. Whatever good fortune had come to Valentine Hawkehurst he had worked for with all honesty of purpose. The critics were not slow to remark that he worked at a white-hot haste, and must needs be a shallow pretender because he was laborious and indefatigable.

Before the beginning of Charlotte's slow decline he had fancied himself the happiest of men. There were more deposit-receipts in his desk. The nest-egg, about the hatching whereof there had been such cackling and crowing some months ago, was now

one of many eggs; for the hard-working scribbler had no leisure in which to be extravagant, had he been so minded. The purchase of a half-circlet of diamonds for his betrothed's slim finger had been his only folly.

Charlotte had remonstrated with him on the impropriety of such an extravagance, and had exacted from him a promise that this wild and Monte-Christo-like course should be pursued no further; but she was very proud of her half-hoop of diamonds nevertheless, and was wont to press it tenderly to her lips before she laid it aside for the night.

"There must be no more such extravagance, sir," she said to her lover, when he sat by her side twisting the ring round and round on her pretty finger. Alas, how loose the ring had become since it had first been placed there!

"Consider the future, Valentine," continued the girl, hopeful of mood while her hand rested in his. "Do you suppose we can furnish our cottage at Wimbledon if we rush into such wild expenses as diamond rings? Do you know that *I* am saving money, Valentine? Yes, positively. Papa gives me a very good allowance for my dresses, and bonnets, and things, you know, and I used to be extravagant and spend it all. But now I have become the most miserly creature; and I have a little packet of money upstairs which you shall put in the Unitas Bank with the rest of your wealth. Diana and I have been darning, and patching, and cutting, and contriving, in the most praiseworthy manner. Even this silk has been turned. You did not think that, did you, when you admired it so?"

Mr. Hawkehurst looked at his beloved with a tender smile. The exact significance of the operation of turning, as applied to silk dresses, was somewhat beyond his comprehension; but he felt sure that to turn must be a laudable action, else why that air of pride with which Charlotte informed him of the fact?

CHAPTER V.

AT HAROLD'S HILL.

The summer sun shone upon the village of Harold's Hill when Charlotte arrived there with Mrs. Sheldon and Diana Paget. Mr. Sheldon was to follow them on the same day by a later train; and Valentine was to come two days afterwards to spend the peaceful interval between Saturday and Monday with his betrothed. He had seen the travellers depart from the London Bridge terminus, but Mr. Sheldon had been there also, and there had been no opportunity for confidential communication between the lovers.

Of all Sussex villages Harold's Hill is perhaps the prettiest

The grey old Saxon church, the scattered farmhouses and pleasant rustic cottages, are built on the slope of a hill, and all the width of ocean lies below the rustic windows. The roses and fuchsias of the cottage gardens seem all the brighter by contrast with that broad expanse of blue. The fresh breath of the salt sea blends with the perfume of new-mown hay and all the homely odours of the farmyard. The lark sings high in the blue vault of heaven above the church, and over the blue of the sea the gull skims white in the sunshine. The fisherman and the farm labourer have their cottages side by side, nestling cosily to leeward of the hilly winding road.

This hilly winding road in the July afternoon seemed to Charlotte almost like the way to Paradise.

"It is like going to heaven, Di!" she cried, with her eyes fixed on the square tower of the old grey church. She wondered why sudden tears sprang to Diana's eyes as she said this. Miss Paget brushed the unbidden tears away with a quick gesture of her hand, and smiled at her friend.

"Yes, dear, the village is very pretty, isn't it?"

"It looks awfully dull!" said Mrs. Sheldon, with a shudder; "and, Diana, I declare there isn't a single shop. *Where* are we to get our provisions? I told Mr. Sheldon St. Leonards would have been a better place for us."

"O mamma, St. Leonards is the very essence of all that is tame and commonplace, compared to this darling rural village! Look, do look, at that fisherman's cottage, with the nets hanging out to dry in the sunshine; just like a picture of Hook's!"

"What's the use of going on about fishermen's cottages, Lotta?" Mrs. Sheldon demanded, peevishly. "Fishermen's cottages won't provide us with butcher's meat. Where are we to get your little bit of roast mutton? Dr. Doddleson laid such a stress upon the roast mutton."

"The sea-air will do me more good than all the mutton that ever was roasted at Eton, mamma. O, dear, is this *our* farmhouse?" cried Charlotte, as the vehicle drew up at a picturesque gate. "O, what a love of a house! what diamond-paned windows! what sweet white curtains! and a cow staring at me quite in the friendliest way across the gate! O, can we be so happy as to live here?"

"Diana," cried Mrs. Sheldon, in a solemn voice, "not a single shop have we passed—not so much as a post-office! And as to haberdashery, I'm sure you might be reduced to rags in this place before you could get so much as a yard of glazed lining!"

The farmhouse was one of those ideal homesteads which, to the dweller in cities, seems fair as the sapphire-ceiled chambers

f the house of Solomon. Charlotte was enraptured by the idea that this was to be her home for the next fortnight.

"I wish it could be for ever, Di," she said, as the two girls were inspecting the rustic, dimity-draperied, lavender-and-rose-leaf-perfumed bedchambers. "Who would wish to go back to prim suburban Bayswater after this? Valentine and I could lodge here after our marriage. It is better than Wimbledon. Grand thoughts would come to him with the thunder of the stormy waves; and on calm bright days like this the rippling water would whisper pretty fancies into his ear. Why, to live here would make any one a poet. I think I could write a novel myself, if I lived here long enough."

After this they arranged the pretty sitting-room, and placed an easy-chair by the window for Charlotte, an arm-chair opposite this for Mrs. Sheldon, and between the two a little table for the fancy work and books and flowers, and all the small necessities of feminine existence. And then—while Mrs. Sheldon prowled about the rooms, and discovered so many faults and made so many objections as to give evidence of a fine faculty for invention unsuspected in her hitherto—Charlotte and Diana explored the garden and peeped at the farmyard, where the friendly cow still stared over the white gate, just as she had stared when the fly came to a stop, as if she had not yet recovered from the astonishment created in her pastoral mind by that phenomenal circumstance. And then Charlotte was suddenly tired, and there came upon her that strange dizziness which was one of her most frequent symptoms. Diana led her immediately back to the house, and established her comfortably in her easy-chair.

"I must be very ill," she said, plaintively; "for even the novelty of this pretty place cannot make me happy long."

Mr. Sheldon arrived in the evening, bringing with him a supply of that simple medicine which Charlotte took three times a day. He had remembered that there was no dispensing chemist at Harold's Hill, and that it would be necessary to send to St. Leonards for the medicine, and had therefore brought with him a double quantity of the mild tonic.

"It was very kind of you to think of it, though I really don't believe the stuff does me any good," said Charlotte. "Nancy Woolper used to get it for me at Bayswater. She made quite a point of fetching it from the chemist's herself."

"Indeed!" exclaimed Mr. Sheldon. "Nancy troubled herself about your medicine, did she?"

"Yes, papa; and about me altogether. If I were her own daughter she could scarcely have seemed more anxious."

The stockbroker made a mental note of this in the memoran-

dum-book of his brain. Mrs. Woolper was officious, was she, and suspicious?—altogether a troublesome sort of person.

"I think a few weeks of workhouse fare would be wholesome for that old lady," he said to himself. "There are some people who never know when they are well off."

Saturday afternoon came in due course, after a long and dreary interval, as it seemed to Charlotte, for whom time travelled very slowly, so painful was the weariness of illness. Now and then a sudden flash of excitement brought the old brightness to her face, the old gaiety to her accents; but the brightness faded very soon, and the languor of illness was very perceptible.

Punctual to the hour at which he was expected, Mr. Hawkehurst appeared, in radiant spirits, laden with new magazines delighted with the village, enraptured with the garden, enchanted with the sea; full of talk and animation, with all sorts of news to tell his beloved. Such and such a book was a failure, such and such a comedy was a fiasco; Jones's novel had made a hit; Brown's picture was the talk of the year; and Charlotte must see the picture that had been talked about, and the play that had been condemned, when she returned to town.

For an hour the lovers sat in the pretty farmhouse parlour talking together thus, the summer sea and the garden flowers before them, and a bird singing high in the calm blue heaven. Charlotte's talk was somewhat languid, though it was perfect happiness for her to be seated thus, with her betrothed by her side; but Valentine's gaiety of spirits never flagged; and when Mrs. Sheldon hinted to him that too long a conversation might fatigue the dear invalid, he left the parlour with a smile upon his face, and a cheery promise to return after an hour's ramble.

He did not ramble far. He went straight to a little wooden summer-house in the remotest corner of the humble garden; and thither Diana Paget followed him. She had learned the language of his face in the time of their daily companionship, and she had seen a look as he left the house which told her of the struggle his cheerfulness had cost him.

"You must not be downhearted, Valentine," she said, as she went into the summer-house, where he sat in a listless attitude, with his arms lying loosely folded on the rustic table.

He did not answer her.

"You don't think her worse—much worse—do you, Valentine?"

"Worse? I have seen death in her face to-day!" he cried; and then he let his forehead fall upon his folded arms, and sobbed aloud.

Diana stood by his side watching that outburst of grief.

When the passionate storm of tears was past, she comforted him as best she might. The change so visible to him was not so plain to her. He had hoped that the breath of the ocean would have magical power to restore the invalid. He had come to Harold's Hill full of hope, and instead of the beginning of an improvement he saw the progress of decay.

"Why did not Sheldon send for the doctor," he asked, indignantly,—"the physician who has attended her? He might have telegraphed to that man."

"Charlotte is taking Dr. Doddleson's medicine," said Diana, "and all his directions are most carefully obeyed."

"What of that, if she grows worse? The doctor should see her daily, hourly, if necessary. And if he cannot cure her, another doctor should be sent for. Good heavens, Diana! are we to let her fade and sink from us before our eyes? I will go back to London at once, and bring that man Doddleson down by the night mail."

"Your going back to London would grieve and alarm Charlotte. You can telegraph for the doctor; or, at least, Mr. Sheldon can do so. It would not do for you to interfere without his permission."

"It would not do!" echoed Valentine, angrily. "Do you think that I am going to stand upon punctilio, or to consider what will do or will not do?"

"Above all things, you must avoid alarming Charlotte," pleaded Diana.

"Do you think I do not know that? Do you think I did not feel that just now, when I sat by her side, talking inane rubbish about books and plays and pictures, while every stolen glance at my darling's face was like a dagger thrust into my heart? I will not alarm her. I will consult Mr. Sheldon—will do anything, everything, to save her! To save her! O my God, has it come to that?"

He grew a little calmer presently under Diana's influence, and went slowly back to the house. He avoided the open window by which Charlotte was sitting. He had not yet schooled himself to meet her questioning looks. He went to the room where they were to dine, a duller and darker apartment than the parlour, and here he found Mr. Sheldon reading a paper, one of the eternal records of the eternal money-market.

The stockbroker had been in and out of the house all day, now sauntering by the sea-shore, now leaning moodily, with folded arms, on the garden gate, meditative and silent as the cow that stared at Charlotte; now pacing the garden walks, with his hands in his pockets and his head bent. Diana, who in her anxiety kept a close watch upon Mr. Sheldon's movements, had noted his restlessness, and perceived in it the sign of

growing anxiety on his part. She knew that he had once called himself surgeon-dentist, and had some medical knowledge, if not so much as he took credit for possessing. He must, therefore, be better able to judge the state of Charlotte's health than utterly ignorant observers. If he were uneasy, there must be real cause for uneasiness. It was on this account, and on this account only, that Diana watched him.

"He must love her better than I gave him credit for being able to love any one," Miss Paget said to herself. "Dear girl! The coldest heart is touched by her sweetness."

Mr. Sheldon looked up from his newspaper as Valentine came into the room, and saluted the visitor with a friendly nod.

"Glad to see you, Hawkehurst," he said. "*Semper fidelis*, and that kind of thing; the very model of devoted lovers. Why, man alive, how glum you look!"

"I think I have reason to look glum," answered Valentine, gravely; "I have seen Charlotte."

"Yes? And don't you find her improving?—gradually, of course. That constitutional languor is not shaken off in a hurry. But surely you think her improving—brightening——"

"Brightening with the light that never shone on earth or sea. God help me! I—I—am the merest child, the veriest coward, the——" He made a great effort, and stifled the sob that had well-nigh broken his voice. "Mr. Sheldon," he continued quietly, "I believe your stepdaughter is dying."

"Dying! Good heavens!—my dear Hawkehurst, this alarm is most—most premature. There is no cause for fear—at present, no cause—I give you my word as a medical man."

"No cause for alarm at present? That means my darling will not be taken from me to-night, or to-morrow. I shall have a few days breathing-time. Yes, I understand. The doom is upon us. I saw the shadow of death upon her face to-day."

"My dear Hawkehurst——"

"My dear Sheldon, for pity's sake don't treat me as if I were a woman or a child. Let me know my fate. If—if—this, the worst, most bitter of all calamities God's hand—raised against me in punishment of past sins, sinned lightly and recklessly, in the days when my heart had no stake in the game of destiny—can inflict upon me; if this deadly sorrow is bearing down upon me, let me meet it like a man. Let me die with my eyes uncovered. O, my dearest, my fondest, redeeming angel of my ill-spent life! have you been only a supernal visitant, after all, shining on me for a little while, to depart when your mission of redemption is accomplished?"

"Powers above!" thought Mr. Sheldon, "what nonsense these sentimental magazine-writers can talk!"

He was in nowise melted by the lover's anguish, though it was very real. Such a grief as this was outside the circle in which his thoughts revolved. This display of grief was unpleasant to him. It grated painfully upon his nerves, as some of poor Tom Halliday's little speeches had done of old, when the honest-hearted Yorkshireman lay on his deathbed; and the young man's presence and the young man's anxiety were alike inconvenient.

"Tell me the truth, Mr. Sheldon," Valentine said presently, with suppressed intensity. "Is there any hope for my darling, any hope?"

Mr. Sheldon considered for some moments before he replied to this question. He pursed-up his lips and bent his brows with the same air of business-like deliberation that he might have assumed while weighing the relative merits of the first and second debenture bonds of some doubtful railway company.

"You ask me a trying question, Hawkehurst," he said at last. "If you ask me plainly whether I like the turn which Charlotte's illness has taken within the last few weeks, I must tell you frankly, *I do not*. There is a persistent want of tone—a visible decay of vital power—which, I must confess, has caused me some uneasiness. You see, the fact is, there is a radical weakness of constitution—as Miss Paget, a very sensible girl and acute observer—herself has remarked, indeed a hereditary weakness; and against this medicine is sometimes unavailing. You need apprehend no neglect on my part, Hawkehurst; all that can possibly be done is being done. Dr. Doddleson's instructions are carefully obeyed, and——"

"Is this Dr. Doddleson competent to grapple with the case?" asked Valentine; "I never heard of him as a great man."

"That fact proves how little you know of the medical profession."

"I know nothing of it; I have had no need for doctors in my life. And you think this Dr. Doddleson really clever?"

"His position is a sufficient answer to that question."

"Will you let me telegraph for him—this afternoon—immediately?"

"You cannot telegraph from this place."

"No, but from St. Leonards I can. Do you think I am afraid of a five-mile walk?"

"But why send for Dr. Doddleson? The treatment he prescribed is the treatment we are now following to the letter. To summon him down here would be the merest folly. Our poor Charlotte's illness is, so far, free from all alarming symptoms."

"You do not see the change in her that I can see," cried Valentine piteously. "For mercy's sake, Mr Sheldon, let me

have my way in this. I cannot stand by and see my dear one fading and do nothing—nothing to save her. Let me send for this man. Let me see him myself, and hear what he says. You can have no objection to his coming, since he is the man you have chosen for Charlotte's adviser? It can only be a question of expense. Let this particular visit be my affair."

"I can afford to pay for my stepdaughter's medical attendance without any help from your purse, Mr. Hawkehurst," said the stockbroker with offended pride. "There is one element in the case which you appear to ignore."

"What is that?"

"The alarm which this summoning of a doctor from London must cause in Charlotte's mind."

"It need cause no alarm. She can be told that Dr. Doddleson has come to this part of the world for a Sunday's change of air. The visit can appear to be made *en passant*. It will be easy to arrange that with the doctor before he sees her."

"As you please, Mr. Hawkehurst," the stockbroker replied coldly. "I consider such a visit to the last degree unnecessary; but if Dr. Doddleson's coming can give you any satisfaction, by all means let him come. The expense involved in summoning him is of the smallest consideration to me. My position with regard to my wife's daughter is one of extreme responsibility, and I am ready to perform all the obligations of that position."

"You are very good: your conduct in relation to Charlotte and myself has been beyond all praise. It is quite possible that I am over-anxious; but there was a look in that dear face—no—I cannot forget that look; it struck terror to my heart. I will go at once to St. Leonards. I can tell Charlotte that I am obliged to telegraph to the printer about my copy. You will not object to that white lie?"

"Not at all. I think it essential that Charlotte should not be alarmed. You had better stop to dine; there will be time for the telegram after dinner,"

"I will not risk that," answered Valentine. "I cannot eat or drink till I have done something to lessen this wretched anxiety."

He went back to the room where Charlotte was sitting by the open window, through which there came the murmur of waves, the humming of drowsy bees, the singing of birds, all the happy voices of happy nature in a harmonious chorus.

"O God, wilt thou take her away from such a beautiful world," he asked, "and change all the glory of earth to darkness and desolation for me?"

His heart rebelled against the idea of her death. To save her,

to win her back to himself from the jaws of death, he was ready to promise anything, to do anything.

"All my days will I give to Thy service, if Thou wilt spare her to me," in his heart he said to his God. "If Thou dost not, I will be an infidel and a pagan—the vilest and most audacious of sinners. Better to serve Lucifer than the God who could so afflict me."

And this is where the semi-enlightened Christian betrays the weakness of his faith. While the sun shines, and the sweet gospel story reads to him like some tender Arcadian idyl, all love and promise, he is firm in his allegiance; but when the dark hour comes, he turns his face to the wall, with anger and disappointment in his heart, and will have no further commune with the God who has chastised him. His faith is the faith of the grateful leper, who, being healed, was eager to return and bless his divine benefactor. It is not the faith of Abraham or of Job, of Paul or of Stephen.

Valentine told his story about the printers and the copy for the *Cheapside* magazine, about which there had arisen some absurd mistake, only to be set right by a telegram.

It was not a very clear account; but Charlotte did not perceive the vagueness of the story; she thought only of the one fact, that Valentine must leave her for some hours.

"The evening will seem so long without you," she said. "That is the worst part of my illness; the time is so long—so weary. Diana is the dearest and kindest of friends. She is always trying to amuse me, and reads to me for hours, though I know she must often be tired of reading aloud so long. But even the books I was once so fond of do not amuse me. The words seem to float indistinctly in my brain, and all sorts of strange images mix themselves up with the images of the people in the book. Di has been reading "The Bride of Lammermoor" all this morning; but the pain and weariness I feel seemed to be entangled with Lucy and Edgar somehow, and the dear book gave me no pleasure."

"My darling, you—you are too weak to listen to Diana's reading. It is very kind of her to try to amuse you; but—but it would be better for you to rest altogether. Any kind of mental exertion may help to retard your recovery."

He had placed himself behind her chair, and was bending over the pillows to speak to her. Just now he felt himself unequal to the command of his countenance. He bent his head until his lips touched the soft brown hair, and kissed those loose soft tresses passionately. The thought occurred to him that a day might come when he should again kiss that soft brown hair, with a deeper passion, with a sharper pain, and when Charlotte would not know of his kisses, or pity his pain.

"O Valentine!" cried Charlotte, "you are crying; I can see your face in the glass."

He had forgotten the glass; the little rococo mirror, with an eagle hovering over the top of the frame, which hung above the old-fashioned chiffonier.

"I am not so very ill, dear; I am not indeed," the girl continued, turning in her chair with an effort, and clasping her lover's hands; "you must not distress yourself like this, Valentine—dear Valentine! I shall be better by and by. I cannot think that I shall be taken from you."

He had broken down altogether by this time. He buried his face in the pillows, and contrived to stifle the sobs that would come; and then, after a sharp struggle, he lifted his face, and bent over the chair once more to kiss the invalid's pale upturned forehead.

"My dear one, you shall not, if love can guard and keep you. No, dear, I *cannot* believe that God will take you from me. Heaven may be your fittest habitation; but such sweet spirits as yours are sorely needed upon earth. I will be brave, dearest one; brave and hopeful in the mercy of Heaven. And now I must go and telegraph to my tiresome printer. *Au revoir!*"

He hurried away from the farmhouse, and started at a rattling pace along the pleasant road, with green waving corn on his left, and broad blue ocean on his right.

"I can get a fly to bring me back from St. Leonard's" he thought; "I should only lose time by hunting for a vehicle here."

He was at St. Leonards station within an hour after leaving the farm. He despatched the message in Mr. Sheldon's name, and took care to make it urgent.

CHAPTER VI.

DESPERATE MEASURES.

Fitful and feverish were the slumbers which visited Mr. Hawkehurst on that balmy summer's night. His waking hours were anxious and unhappy; but his sleeping hours were still more painful. To sleep was to be the feverish fool of vague wild visions, in which Charlotte and Dr. Doddleson, the editor of the *Cheapside*, the officials of the British Museum reading-room, Diana Paget, and the Sheldons, figured amidst inextricable confusion of circumstances and places. Throughout these wretched dreams he had some consciousness of himself and the room in which he was lying, the July moon shining upon him, broad and bright, through the diamond-paned lattice. And O, what tor-

turing visions were those in which Charlotte smiled upon him, radiant with health and happiness; and there had been no such thing as her illness, no such thing as his grief. And then came hurried dreams, in which Dr. Doddleson was knocking at the farmhouse door, with the printer of the *Cheapside*. And then he was a spectator in a mighty theatre, large as those Roman amphitheatres, wherein the audience seemed a mass of flies, looking down on the encounter of two other flies, and all the glory of an imperial court only a little spot of purple and gold, gleaming afar in the sunshine. To the dreamer it was no surprise that this unknown theatre of his dreams should be vast as the gladiatorial arena. And then came the deep thunderous music of innumerable bass-viols and bassoons: and some one told him it was the first night of a great tragedy. He felt the breathless hush of expectation; the solemn bass music sank deeper; dark curtains were drawn aside, with a motion slow and solemn, like the waving of mountain pines, and there appeared a measureless stage, revealing a moonlit expanse, thickly studded with the white headstones of unnumbered graves, and on the foremost of these—revealed to him by what power he knew not, since mortal sight could never have reached a point so distant—he read the name of Charlotte Halliday. He awoke with a sharp cry of pain. It was broad day, and the waves were dancing gaily in the morning sunlight. He rose and dressed himself. Sleep, such as he had known that night, was worse than the weariest waking. He went out into the garden by and by, and paced slowly up and down the narrow pathways, beside which box of a century's growth rose dark and high. Pale yellow lights were in the upper windows. He wondered which of those sickly tapers flickered on the face he loved so fondly.

"It is only a year since I first saw her," he thought: "one year! And to love her has been my 'liberal education;' to lose her would be my desolation and despair."

To lose her! His thoughts approached that dread possibility, but could not realize it; not even yet.

At eight o'clock Diana came to summon him to breakfast.

"Shall I see Charlotte?" he asked.

"No; for some time past she has not come down to breakfast."

"What kind of night has she had?"

"A very quiet night, she tells me; but I am not quite sure that she tells me the truth, she is so afraid of giving us uneasiness."

"She tells you. But do you not sleep in her room, now that she is so ill?"

"No. I was anxious to sleep on a sofa at the foot of her bed, and proposed doing so, but Mr. Sheldon objects to my being in the room. He thinks that Charlotte is more quiet entirely alone, and that there is more air in the room with only one

sleeper. Her illness is not of a kind to require attention of any sort in the night."

"Still I should have thought it better for her to have you with her, to cheer and comfort her.

"Believe me, Valentine, I wished to be with her."

"I am sure of that, dear," he answered kindly.

"It was only Mr. Sheldon's authority, as a man of some edical experience, that conquered my wish."

"Well, I suppose he is right. And now we must go in to breakfast. Ah, the dreary regularity of these breakfasts and dinners, which go on just the same when our hearts are breaking!"

The breakfast was indeed a dreary soul-dispiriting meal. Farmhouse luxuries, in the way of new-laid eggs and home-cured bacon, abounded; but no one had any inclination for these things. Valentine remembered the homestead among the Yorkshire hills, with all the delight that he had known there; and the "sorrow's crown of sorrow" was very bitter. Mr. Sheldon gave his Sabbath-morning meditations to the study of a Saturday-evening share-list; and Georgy plunged ever and anon in the closely printed pages of a Dissenting preacher's biography, which she declared to be "comforting."

Diana and Valentine sat silent and anxious; and after the faintest pretence of eating and drinking, they both left the table, to stroll drearily in the garden. The bells were ringing cheerily from the grey stone tower near at hand; but Valentine had no inclination for church on this particular morning. Were not all his thoughts prayers—humble piteous entreaties—for one priceless boon?

"Will you see the doctor when he comes, and manage matters so as not to alarm Charlotte?" he asked of Mr. Sheldon.

That gentleman agreed to do so, and went out into the little front-garden to lie in wait for the great Doddleson—"Dowager Doddleson" as he was surnamed by some irreverent unbelievers.

A St. Leonards fly brought the doctor while the bells were still ringing for morning service. Mr. Sheldon received him at the gate, and explained the motive of his summons.

The doctor was full of pompous solicitude about "our sweet young patient."

"Really one of the most interesting cases I ever had upon my hands," the West-end physician said blandly; "as I was remarking to a very charming patient of mine—in point of fact, the amiable and accomplished Countess of Kassel-Kumberterre, only last Tee-usday morning. A case so nearly resembling the Countess's own condition as to be highly interesting to her."

"I really ought to apologize for bringing you down," said

Mr. Sheldon, as he led the doctor into the house. "I only consented to your being sent for in order to tranquillize this young fellow Hawkehurst, who is engaged to my daughter; a rising man, I believe, in his own particular line, but rather wild and impracticable. There is really no change for the worse, absolutely none; and as we have not been here more than three days, there has been positively no opportunity for testing the effect of change and sea air, and so on."

This seemed rather like giving the learned physician his cue. And there were those among Dr. Doddleson's professional rivals who said that the worthy doctor was never slow to take a cue so given, not being prejudiced by any opinions of his own.

Charlotte had by this time been established in her easy-chair by the open window of the sitting-room, and here Dr. Doddleson saw her, in the presence of Mr. and Mrs. Sheldon; and here Dr. Doddleson went through the usual Abracadabra of his art, and assented to the opinions advanced, with all deference, by Mr. Sheldon.

To Georgy this interview, in which Mr. Sheldon's opinions were pompously echoed by the West-end physician, proved even more comforting than the benignant career of the Dissenting minister, who was wont to allude to that solemn passing hence of which the ancients spoke in dim suggestive phrase, as "going upstairs."

Diana and Valentine strolled in the garden while the physician saw his patient. Dr. Doddleson's ponderous polysyllables floated out upon the summer air like the droning of a humble-bee. It was a relief to Valentine to know that the doctor was with his patient: but he had no intention to let that gentleman depart unquestioned.

"I will take no secondhand information," he thought; "I will hear this man's opinion from his own lips."

He went round to the front of the house directly the droning had ceased, and was in the way when Dr. Doddleson and Mr. Sheldon came out of the rose-hung porch.

"If you have no objection," he said to Mr. Sheldon, "I should like to ask Dr. Doddleson a few questions."

"*I* have no objection," replied the stockbroker; "but it is really altogether such an unusual thing, and I doubt if Dr. Doddleson will consent to——"

And here he cast a deprecating glance at the doctor, as who should say, "Can you permit yourself to comply with a demand so entirely unwarranted by precedent?"

Dowager Doddleson was eminently good-natured.

"And this is our sweet young friend's *fiancé*," he said; "dear me—dee-ar me!"

And then he looked at Valentine with bland pale-blue eyes

that twinkled behind his gold-framed spectacles; while Valentine was taking his measure, so far as the measure of any man's moral and intellectual force can be taken by the eyes of another man.

"And this is the man who is chosen to snatch my darling from the jaws of death!" he said to himself, with burning rage in his heart, while the amiable physician repeated blandly:

"And this is our sweet young patient's *fiancé*. Dee-ar me, how very interesting!"

The three men strolled round to the garden behind the house, Mr. Sheldon close at the physician's elbow.

"For God's sake tell me the truth, Dr. Doddleson!" said Valentine in a low hoarse voice, directly they were beyond earshot of the house. "I am a man, and I can steel myself to hear the worst you can tell."

"But really, Hawkehurst, there is no occasion for this kind of thing," interjected Philip Sheldon; "Dr. Doddleson agrees with me, that the case is one of extreme languor, and no more."

"Unquestionably," said the doctor in a fat voice.

"And Dr. Doddleson also coincides with me in the opinion that all we can do is to wait the reviving influence of sea-air."

"Undoubtedly," said the doctor, with a solemn nod.

"And is this all?" asked Valentine hopelessly.

"My dear sir, what else can I say?" said the doctor; "as my good friend Mr. Sheldon has just remarked, there is extreme languor; and as my good friend Mr. Sheldon further observes, we must await the effect of change of air. The—aw—invigorating sea-breezes, the—aw—enlivening influence of new surroundings, and—aw—so forth. Dr. Poseidon, my dear sir, is a very valuable coadjutor."

"And you think your patient no worse, Dr. Doddleson?"

"The doctor has just left Mrs. Sheldon much comforted by his assurance that her daughter is better," said the stockbroker.

"No, no!" exclaimed Dr. Doddleson; "no, no! *there* my good friend Mr. Sheldon somewhat misrepresents me. I said that our patient was not obviously worse. I did not say that our patient was better. There is a dilatation of the pupil of the eye which I don't quite understand."

"Mental excitement," said Mr. Sheldon, somewhat hastily; "Charlotte is nervous to an extreme degree, and your sudden arrival was calculated to shake her nerves."

"Undoubtedly," rejoined the doctor; "and it is unquestionable that such a dilatation of the pupil might, under certain circumstances, be occasioned by mental excitement. I am sorry to find that our patient's attacks of dizziness——"

"Which are purely the effect of fancy," interjected Mr Sheldon.

"Which are no doubt, in some measure, attributable to a hypochondriacal condition of mind," continued the doctor in his fat voice. "I am sorry to find that this periodical dizziness has been somewhat increased of late. But here again we must look to Dr. Poseidon. Tepid sea-baths, if they can be managed, in the patient's own room; and by and by a dip in the waves yonder, may do wonders."

Valentine asked no further questions; and the physician departed in the St. Leonards fly, to turn his excursion to profitable use by calling on two or three dowagers in Warrior Square and Marina, who would doubtless be glad of an unexpected visit from their pet doctor.

"Well, Hawkehurst," said Mr. Sheldon, when the fly had driven away, "I hope you are satisfied now?"

"Satisfied!" cried Valentine; "yes, I am satisfied that your stepdaughter is being murdered!"

"Murdered!" echoed the stockbroker, his voice thick and faint; but Valentine did not heed the change in it.

"Yes, murdered—sacrificed to the utter incompetence of that old idiot who has just left us."

Philip Sheldon drew a long breath.

"What!" he exclaimed; "do you doubt Doddleson's skill?"

"Do you believe in it? Do you? No; I cannot think that a man of your keen perception in all other matters—half a medical man yourself—can be the dupe of so shallow an impostor. And it is to that man's judgment my darling's life has been confided; and it is to that man I have looked, with hope and comfort in the thought of his power to save my treasure! Good God! what a reed on which to rely! And of all the medical men of London, this is the one you have chosen!"

"I must really protest against this rant, Hawkehurst," said Philip Sheldon. "I hold myself responsible for the selection which I made, and will not have that selection questioned in this violent and outrageous manner by you. Your anxiety for Charlotte's recovery may excuse a great deal, but it cannot excuse this kind of thing; and if you cannot command yourself better, I must beg you to absent yourself from my house until my stepdaughter's recovery puts an end to all this fuss."

"Do you believe in Dr. Doddleson's skill?" asked Valentine doggedly. He wanted to have that question answered at any cost.

"Most decidedly I do, with the rest of the medical world. My choice of this gentleman as Charlotte's adviser was governed by his reputation as a safe and conscientious man. His opinions are sound, trustworthy——"

"*His* opinions!" cried Valentine with a bitter laugh; "what in heaven's name do you call his opinions? The only opinions

I could extract from him to-day were solemn echoes of yours. And the man himself! I took the measure of him before I asked him a question; and physiology is a lie if that man is anything better than an impostor."

"His position is the answer to that."

"His position is no answer. He is not the first impostor who has attained position, and is not likely to be the last. You must forgive me, if I speak with some violence, Mr. Sheldon. I feel too deeply to remember the conventionalities of my position. The dear girl yonder, hovering between life and death, is my promised wife. As your stepdaughter she is very dear to you, no doubt, and you are of course anxious to do your duty as her stepfather. But she is all the world to me—my one sweet memory of the past, my sole hope for the future. I will not trust her to the care of Dr. Doddleson; I claim the right to choose another physician—as that man's coadjutor, if you please. I have no wish to offend the doctor of your choice."

"This is all sheer nonsense," said Mr. Sheldon.

"It is nonsense about which you must let me have my own way," replied Valentine, resolutely. "My stake on this hazard is too heavy for careless play. I shall go back to town at once and seek out a physician."

"Do you know any great man?"

"No; but I will find one."

"If you go to-day, you will inevitably alarm Charlotte."

"True; and disappoint her into the bargain. I suppose in such a case to-morrow will do as well as to-day?"

"Decidedly."

"I can go by the first train, and return with my doctor in the afternoon. Yes, I will go to-morrow."

Mr. Sheldon breathed more freely. There are cases in which to obtain time for thought seems the one essential thing—cases in which a reprieve is as good as a pardon.

"Pray let us consider this business quietly," he said, with a faint sigh of weariness. "There is no necessity for all this excitement. You can go to town to-morrow, by the first train, as you say. If it is any satisfaction to you to bring down a physician, bring one; bring half a dozen, if you please. But, for the last time, I most emphatically assure you that anything that tends to alarm Charlotte is the one thing of all others most sure to hinder her recovery."

"I know that. She shall not be frightened; but she shall have a better adviser than Dr. Doddleson. And now I will go back to the house. She will wonder at my absence."

He went to the bright, airy room where Charlotte was seated, her head lying back upon the pillows, her face paler, her glances and tones more languid than on the previous day,

as it seemed to Valentine. Diana was near her, solicitous and tender; and on the other side of the window sat Mrs. Sheldon, with her Dissenting minister's biography open on her lap.

All through that day Valentine Hawkehurst played his part bravely: it was a hard and bitter part to play—the part of hope and confidence while unutterable fears were rending his heart. He read the epistle and gospel of the day to his betrothed; and afterwards some chapters of St. John—those profoundly mournful chapters that foreshadow the agonising close. It was Charlotte who selected these chapters, and her lover could find no excuse for disputing her choice.

It was the first time that they had shared any religious exercise, and the hearts of both were deeply touched by the thought of this.

"How frivolous all our talk must have been, Valentine, when it seems so new to us to be reading these beautiful words together?"

Her head was half supported by the pillows, half resting on her lover's shoulder, and her eyes travelled along the lines as he read, in a calm low voice, which was unbroken to the end.

Early in the evening Charlotte retired, worn out by the day's physical weariness, in spite of Valentine's fond companionship. Later, when it was dusk, Diana came downstairs with the news that the invalid was sleeping quietly. Mrs. Sheldon was dozing in her arm-chair, the Dissenting minister having fallen to the ground; and Valentine was leaning, with folded arms, on the broad window-sill looking out into the shadowy garden. Mr. Sheldon had given them very little of his society during that day. He went out immediately after his interview with Valentine, on a sea-coast ramble, which lasted till dinner-time. After dinner he remained in the room where they had dined. He was there now. The light of the candles, by which he read his papers, shone out upon the dusk.

"Will you come for a stroll with me, Diana?" asked Valentine.

Miss Paget assented promptly; and they went out into the garden, beyond the reach of Mr Sheldon's ears, had that gentleman been disposed to place himself at his open window in the character of a listener.

"I want to tell you my plans about Charlotte," Valentine began. "I am going to London to-morrow to search for a greater physician than Dr. Doddleson. I shall find my man in an hour or so; and, if possible, shall return with him in the evening. There is no apparent reason to anticipate any sudden change for the worse; but if such a change should take place,

I rely on you, dear, to give me the earliest tidings of it. I suppose you can get a fly here, if you want one?"

"I can get to St. Leonards, if that is what you mean," Miss Paget answered promptly. "I dare say there is a fly to be had; if not, I can walk there. I am not afraid of a few miles' walk, by day or night. If there should be a change, Valentine—which God forbid—I will telegraph the tidings of it to you."

"You had better address the message to me at Raney's, Covent Garden; the house where the Ragamuffins have their rooms, you know, dear. That is a more central point than my lodgings, and nearer the terminus. I will call there two or three times in the course of the day."

"You may trust my vigilance, Valentine. I did not think it was in my nature to love any one as I love Charlotte Halliday."

Gustave Lenoble's letters lying unanswered in her desk asserted the all-absorbing nature of Diana's affection for the fading girl. She *was* fading. The consciousness of this made all other love sacrilege, as it seemed to Diana. She sat up late that night to answer Gustave's last letter of piteous complaint.

"She had forgotten him. Ah, that he had been foolish—insensate—to confide himself in her love! Was he not old and grey in comparison to such youth—such freshness—a venerable dotard of thirty-five? What had he with dreams of love and marriage? Fie, then. He humiliated himself in the dust beneath her *mignon* feet. He invited her to crush him with those cruel feet. But if she did not answer his letters, he would come to Harold's Hill. He would mock himself of that ferocious Sheldon—of a battalion of Sheldons still more ferocious—of all the world, at last—to be near her."

"Believe me, dear Gustave, I do not forget," wrote Diana, in reply to these serio-comic remonstrances. "I was truly sorry to leave town, on your account and on my father's. But my dear adopted sister is paramount with me now. You will not grudge her my care or my love, for she may not long be with me to claim them. There is nothing but sorrow here in all our hearts; sorrow, and an ever-present dread."

Book the Eighth.

A FIGHT AGAINST TIME.

CHAPTER I.

A DREAD REVELATION.

The early fast train by which Valentine Hawkehurst travelled brought him into town at a quarter past nine o'clock. During the journey he had been meditating on the way in which he should set to work when he arrived in London. No ignorance could be more profound than his on all points relating to the medical profession. Dimly floating in his brain there were the names of doctors whom he had heard of as celebrated men—one for the chest, another for the liver, another for the skin, another for the eyes; but, among all these famous men, who was the man best able to cope with the mysterious wasting away, the gradual, almost imperceptible ebbing of that one dear life which Valentine wanted to save?

This question must be answered by some one; and Valentine was sorely puzzled as to who that some one must be.

The struggling young writer had but few friends. He had, indeed, worked too hard for the possibility of friendship. The cultivation of the severer Muses is rarely compatible with a wide circle of acquaintances; and Valentine, if not a cultivator of these severe ones, had been a hard and honest worker during the later reputable portion of his life. His friendships of the previous portion had been the friendships of the railway-carriage and the smoking room, the *café* and the gaming-table. He could count upon his fingers the people to whom he could apply for counsel in this crisis of his life. There was George Sheldon, a man for whom he entertained a most profound contempt; Captain Paget, a man who might or might not be able to give him good advice, but who would inevitably sacrifice Charlotte Halliday's welfare to self-interest, if self-interest could be served by the recommendation of an incompetent adviser.

"He would send me to some idiot of the Doddleson class, if he thought he could get a guinea or a dinner by the recommendation," Valentine said to himself, and decided that to Horatio Paget he would not apply. There were his employers, the editors and poprietors of the magazines for which he worked;

all busy over-burdened workers in the great mill, spending the sunny hours of their lives between a pile of unanswered letters and a waste-paper basket; men who would tell him to look in the Post-office Directory, without lifting their eyes from the paper over which their restless pens were speeding.

No. Amongst these was not the counsellor whom Valentine Hawkehurst needed in this dire hour of difficulty.

"There are some very good fellows among the Ragamuffins," he said to himself, as he thought of the only literary and artistic club of which he was a member; "fellows who stuck by me when I was down in the world, and who would do anything to serve me now they know me for an honest worker. But, unfortunately, farce writers and burlesque writers, and young meerschaum-smoking painters, are not the sort of men to give good advice: I want the advice of a medical man."

Mr. Hawkehurst almost bounded from his seat as he said this. The advice of a medical man? Yes; and was there not a medical man among the Ragamuffins? and something more than a medical man? That very doctor, who of all other men upon this earth could best give him counsel—the doctor who had stood by the deathbed of Charlotte Halliday's father.

He remembered the conversation that had occurred at Bayswater, on the evening of Christmas day, upon this very subject. He remembered how from the talk about ghosts they had drifted somehow into talking of Tom Halliday; whereupon Mrs. Sheldon had been melted to tears, and had gone on to praise Philip Sheldon's conduct to his dying friend, and to speak of Mr. Burkham, the strange doctor, called in too late to save, or, it might have been, incapable to save.

"Sheldon seems to have a genius for calling in incapable doctors," he thought bitterly.

Incapable as Mr. Burkham might have been for the exigencies of this particular case, he would at least be able to inform Valentine who among the medical celebrities of London would be best adapted to advise in such an illness as Charlotte Halliday's.

"And if, as Diana has sometimes suggested, there is any hereditary disease, this Burkham may be able to throw some light upon the nature of it," thought Valentine.

He went straight from the railway terminus to the quiet tavern upon the first floor of which the Ragamuffins had their place of rendezvous. It was not an hour for the encounter of many Ragamuffins. A meek-looking young man, of clerical aspect, who had adapted a Palais Royal farce, and had awoke in the morning to find himself famous, and eligible for admission amongst the Ragamuffins, was sipping his sherry and soda-water while he skimmed the morning papers. Him Mr. Hawke-

hurst saluted with an absent nod, and went in search of the steward of the club, from whom he obtained Mr. Burkham's address, with some little trouble in the way of hunting through old and obscure documents.

It was the old address; the old dingy, comfortable, muffin-bell-haunted street in which Mr. Burkham had lived ten years before, when he was summoned to attend the sick Yorkshire farmer.

Mr. Burkham's career had not been brightened by the sunshine of prosperity. He had managed to live somehow, and to find food and raiment for his young wife, who, when she considered the lilies of the field, may have envied their shining robes of pure whiteness, so dingy and dark was her own apparel. When children came, the young surgeon contrived to find food and raiment for them also, but not without daily and hourly struggles with that grim wolf who haunts the thresholds of so many dwellings, and will not be thrust from the door. Sometimes a little glimmering ray of light illumined Mr. Burkham's pathway, and he was humbly grateful to Providence for the brief glimpse of sunshine. But for a meek fair-faced man, with a nervous desire to do well, a very poor opinion of his own merits, and a diffident, not to say depressed manner, the world is apt to be a hard battle-ground.

Mr. Burkham sometimes found himself well-nigh beaten in the cruel strife; and at such times, in the dead silence of the night, with mortal agonies, and writhings as of Pythoness upon tripod, Mr. Burkham gave himself up to the composition of a farce, adapted, not from the French, but from his memories of Wright and Bedford in the jovial old student days, when the pit of the Adelphi Theatre had been the pleasant resort of his evenings. He could no longer afford the luxury of theatrical entertainments, except when provided with a free admission. But from the hazy reminiscences floating in his poor tired brain he concocted little pieces which he fondly hoped might win him money and fame.

With much effort and interest he contrived to get himself elected a Ragamuffin; believing that to be a Ragmuffin was to secure a position as a dramatic writer. But with one or two fortunate exceptions, his pieces were refused. The managers would not have the poor little feeble phantasmagoria of bygone fun, even supported by the whole clan of Ragamuffins. So Mr. Burkham had gradually melted into the dimness of Bloomsbury, and haunted the club-room of the Ragamuffins no more.

A hansom carried Valentine Hawkehurst swiftly to these regions of Bloomsbury. It was no time for the saving of cab-hire. The soldier of fortune thought no longer of his nest-eggs —his Unitas Bank deposit-notes. He was fighting with time

and with death; foes dire and dreadful, against whose encroachments the sturdiest of mortal warriors can make but a feeble stand. He found the dingy-looking house in the dingy-looking street; and the humble drudge who opened the door informed him that Mr. Burkham was at home, and ushered him into a darksome and dreary surgery at the back of the house, where a phrenological head, considerably the worse for London smoke, surmounted a dingy bookcase filled with the dingiest of books. A table, upon which were a blotting-book and inkstand, and two shabby horsehair chairs, composed the rest of the furniture. Valentine sent his card to the surgeon, and seated himself on one of the horsehair chairs, to await that gentleman's appearance.

He came after a brief delay, which seemed long to his visitor. He came from regions in the back of the house, rubbing his hands, which seemed to have been newly washed, and the odour of senna and aloes hung about his garments.

"I doubt if you remember my name, Mr. Burkham," said Valentine; "but you and I are members of the same club, and that a club among the members of which considerable good feeling prevails. I come to ask a favour"—Mr. Burkham winced, for this sounded like genteel begging, and for genteel beggars this struggling surgeon had no spare cash—"which it will scarcely cause you a moment's thought to grant. I am in great distress"—Mr. Burkham winced again, for this sounded still more like begging—"mental distress"—Mr. Burkham gave a little sigh of relief—"and I come to you for advice." Mr. Burkham gave a more profound sigh of relief.

"I can assure you that my best advice is at your command," he said, seating himself, and motioning to his visitor to be seated. "I am beginning to remember your face amongst the members of the club, though the name on your card did not strike me as familiar. You see, I have never been able to afford much time for relaxation at the Ragamuffins', though I assure you I found the agreeable conversation there, the literary *on dits*, and so on, a very great relief. But my own little efforts in the dramatic line were not successful, and I found myself compelled to devote myself more to my profession. And now I have said quite enough about myself; let me hear how I can be useful to you."

"In the first place, let me ask you a question. Do you know anything of a certain Dr. Doddleson?"

"Of Plantagenet Square?"

"Yes; of Plantagenet Square."

"Well, not much. I have heard him called Dowager Doddleson; and I believe he is very popular among hypochondriac old ladies who have more money than they know what to do with, and very little common sense to regulate their disposal of it."

"Is Dr. Doddleson a man to whom you would intrust the life of your dearest friend?"

"Most emphatically no!" cried the surgeon, growing red with excitement.

"Very well, Mr. Burkham; my dearest friend, a young lady—well, in plain truth, the woman who was to have been my wife, and whom I love as it is not the lot of every plighted wife to be loved—this dear girl has been wasting away for the last two or three months under the influence of an inscrutable malady, and Dr. Doddleson is the only man called to attend her in all that time."

"A mistake!" said Mr. Burkham, gravely; "a very great mistake! Dr. Doddleson lives in a fine square, and drives a fine carriage, and has a reputation amongst the class I have spoken of; but he is about the last man I would consult as to the health of any one dear to me."

"That is precisely the opinion which I formed after ten minutes' conversation with him. Now, what I want from you, Mr. Burkham, is the name and address of the man to whom I can intrust this dear girl's life."

"Let me see. There are so many men, you know, and great men. Is it a case of consumption?"

"No, thank God!"

"Heart-disease, perhaps?"

"No; there is no organic disease. It is a languor—a wasting away."

Mr. Burkham suggested other diseases whereof the outward sign was languor and wasting.

"No," replied Valentine; "according to Dr. Doddleson there is actually no disease—nothing but this extreme prostration—this gradual vanishing of vital power. And now I come to another point upon which I want your advice. It has been suggested that this constitutional weakness may be inherited; and here I think you can help me."

"How so?"

"You attended the lady's father."

"Indeed!" cried Mr. Burkham, delighted. "This is really interesting. In what year did I attend this gentleman? If you will allow me, I will refer to some of my old case-books."

He drew out a clumsy drawer in the clumsy table, in order to hunt for old memoranda.

"I am not quite certain as to the year," answered Valentine; "but it was more than ten years ago. The gentleman died close by here, in Fitzgeorge Street. His name was Halliday."

Mr. Burkham had drawn out the drawer to its farthest extent. As Valentine pronounced this name, he let it drop to the ground with a crash, and sat, statue-like, staring at the speaker. All

other names given to mortal man he might forget; but this one never. Valentine saw the sudden horror in his face, before he could recompose his features into something of their conventional aspect.

"Yes," he said, looking down at the fallen drawer with its scattered papers and case-books, "yes, I have some recollection of the name of Halliday."

"Some very strange and agitating recollection it would seem by your manner, Mr. Burkham," said Valentine, at once assured that there was something more than common in the surgeon's look and gesture; and determined to fathom the mystery, let it be what it might.

"O dear no," said the surgeon nervously; "I was not agitated, only surprised. It was surprising to me to hear the name of a patient so long forgotten. And so the lady to whom you are engaged is a daughter of Mr. Halliday's? The wife—Mrs. Halliday—is still living, I suppose?"

"Yes; but the lady who was then Mrs. Halliday is now Mrs. Sheldon."

"Of course; he married her," said Mr. Burkham. "Yes; I remember hearing of the marriage."

He had tried in vain to recover his old composure. He was white to the lips, and his hand shook as he tried to arrange his scattered papers.

"What does it mean?" thought Valentine. "Mrs. Sheldon talked of this man's inexperience. Can it be that his incompetency lost the life of his patient, and that he knows it was so?"

"Mrs. Halliday is now Mrs. Sheldon," repeated the surgeon, in a feeble manner. "Yes, I remember; and Mr. Sheldon—the dentist, who at that time resided in Fitzgeorge Street—is he still living?"

"He is still living. It was he who called in Dr. Doddleson to attend upon Miss Halliday. As her stepfather, he has some amount of authority, you see; not legal authority—for my dear girl is of age—but social authority. He called in Doddleson, and appears to place confidence in him; and as he is something of a medical man himself, and pretends to understand Miss Halliday's case thoroughly——"

"Stop!" cried Mr. Burkham, suddenly abandoning all pretence of calmness. "Has he—Sheldon—any interest in his stepdaughter's death?"

"No, certainly not. All her father's money went to him upon his marriage with her mother. He can gain nothing by her death; on the contrary, he may lose a good deal, for she is the heir-at-law to a large fortune."

"And if she dies, that fortune will go——"

"I really don't know where it will go," Valentine answered carelessly: he thought the subject was altogether beside the question of Mr. Burkham's agitation, and it was the cause of that agitation which he was anxious to discover.

"If Mr. Sheldon can gain by his stepdaughter's death, fear him!" exclaimed the surgeon, with sudden passion; "fear him as you would fear death itself—worse than death, for death is neither so stealthy nor so treacherous as he is!"

"What in Heaven's name do you mean?"

"That which I thought my lips would never utter to mortal hearing—that which I dare not publicly proclaim, at the hazard of taking the bread out of the mouths of my wife and children. I have kept this hateful secret for eleven years—through many a sleepless night and dreary day. I will tell it to you; for if there is another life in peril, that life shall be lost through no cowardice of mine."

"What secret?" cried Valentine.

"The secret of that poor fellow's death. My God! I can remember the clasp of his hand, and the friendly look of his eyes, the day before he died. He was poisoned by Philip Sheldon!"

"You must be mad!" gasped Valentine, in a faint voice.

For one moment of astonishment and incredulity he thought this man must needs be a fool or a lunatic, so wildly improbable did the accusation seem. But in the next instant the curtain was lifted, and he knew that Philip Sheldon was a villain, and knew that he had never wholly trusted him.

"Never until to-day have I told this secret," said the surgeon; "not even to my wife.'

"I thank you," answered Valentine, in the same faint voice; "with all my heart, I thank you."

Yes, the curtain was lifted. This mysterious illness, this slow silent decay of bloom and beauty, by a process inscrutable as the devilry of mediæval poisoner or Hecate-serving witch—this was murder. Murder! The disease, which had hitherto been nameless, had found its name at last. It was all clear now. Philip Sheldon's anxiety; the selection of an utterly incompetent adviser; certain looks and tones that had for a moment mystified him, and had been forgotten in the next, came back to him with a strange distinctness, with all their hidden meaning made clear and plain as the broad light of day.

But the motive? What motive could prompt the slow destruction of that innocent life? A fortune was at stake, it is true; but that fortune, as Valentine understood the business, depended on the life of Charlotte Halliday. Beyond this point he had never looked. In all his consideration of the circumstances relating to the Haygarthian estate, he had never

thought of what might happen in the event of Charlotte's decease.

"It is a diabolical mystery," he said to himself. "There can be no motive—*none*. To destroy Thomas Halliday was to clear his way to fortune; to destroy Charlotte is to destroy his chance of fortune."

And then he remembered the dark speeches of George Sheldon.

"My God! and *this* was what he meant, as plainly as he dared tell me! He did tell me that his brother was an unutterable scoundrel; and I turned a deaf ear to his warning, because it suited my own interest to believe that villain. For her dear sake I believed him. I would have believed in Beelzebub, if he had promised me her dear hand. And I let myself be duped by the lying promise, and left my darling in the power of Beelzebub!"

Thoughts followed each other swift as lightning through his overwrought brain. It seemed but a moment that he had been sitting with his clenched hands pressed against his forehead, when he turned suddenly upon the surgeon.

"For God's sake, help me, guide me!" he said. "You have struck a blow that has numbed my senses. What am I to do? My future wife is in that man's keeping—dying, as I believe. How am I to save her?"

"I cannot tell you. You may take the cleverest man in London to see her; but it is a question if that man will perceive the danger so clearly as to take prompt measures. In these cases there is always room for doubt; and a man would rather doubt his own perceptions than believe the hellish truth. It is by this natural hesitation so many lives are lost. While the doctor deliberates, the patient dies. And then, if the secret of the death transpires—by circumstantial evidence, perhaps, which never came to the doctor's knowledge,—there is a public outcry. The doctor's practice is ruined, and his heart broken. The outcry would have been still louder if he had told the truth in time to save the patient, and had not been able to prove his words. You think me a coward and a scoundrel because I dared not utter my suspicion when I saw Mr. Halliday dying. While it was only a suspicion it would have been certain ruin for me to give utterance to it. The day came when it was almost a conviction. I went back to that man Sheldon's house, determined to insist upon the calling in of a physician who would have made that conviction certainty. My resolution came too late. It is possible that Sheldon had perceived my suspicions, and had hastened matters. My patient was dead before I reached the house."

"How am I to save her?" repeated Valentine, with the same

helpless manner. He could not bring himself to consider Tom Halliday's death. The subject was too far away from him—remote as the dim shadows of departed centuries. In all the universe there were but two figures standing out in lurid brightness against the dense night of chaos—a helpless girl held in the clutches of a secret assassin; and it was his work to rescue her.

"What am I to do?" he asked. "Tell me what I am to do."

"What it may be wisest to do I cannot tell you," answered Mr. Burkham, almost as helplessly as the other had asked the question. "I can give you the name of the best man to get to the bottom of such a case—a man who gave evidence on the Fryar trial—Jedd. You have heard of Jedd, I daresay. You had better go straight to Jedd, and take him down with you to Miss Halliday. His very name will frighten Sheldon."

"I will go at once. Stay—the address! Where am I to find Dr. Jedd?"

'In Burlington Row. But there is one thing to be considered."

"What?"

"The interference of Jedd may only make that man desperate. He may hasten matters now as he hastened matters before. If you had seen his coolness at that time; if you had seen him, as I saw him, standing by that poor fellow's deathbed, comforting him—yes, with friendly speeches—laughing and joking, watching the agonising pain and the miserable sickness, and all the dreary wretchedness of such a death, and *never* swerving from his work; if you had seen him, you would understand why I am afraid to advise you. That man was as desperate as he was cool when he murdered his friend. He will be more reckless this time."

"Why?"

"Because he has reached a higher stage in the science of murder. The symptoms of that poor Yorkshireman were the symptoms of arsenical poisoning; the symptoms of which you have told me to-day denote a vegetable poison. *That* affords very vague diagnosis, and leaves no trace. That was the agent which enabled the Borgias to decimate Rome. It is older than classic Greece, and simple as *a b c*, and will remain so until the medical expert is a recognized officer of the law, the faithful guardian of the bed over which the suspected poisoner loiters—past-master of the science in which the murderer is rarely more than an experimentalist, and protected from all the hazards of plain speaking by the nature of his office."

"Great Heaven, how am I to save her?" exclaimed Valentine. He could not contemplate the subject in its broad social aspect; he could only think of this one dear life at stake. "To send

this Dr. Jedd might be to hasten her death; to send a less efficient man would be mere childishness. WHAT shall I do?"

He looked despairingly at the surgeon, and in that one glance perceived what a frail reed this was upon which he was leaning. And then, like the sudden gleam of lightning, a name flashed across his mind,—George Sheldon, the lawyer, the schemer, the man who of all the world best knew this vile enemy and assassin against whom he was matched; he it was of whom counsel should be asked in this crisis. Once perceiving this, Valentine was prompt to act. It was the first flash of light in the darkness.

"You mean to stand by me in this, don't you?" he asked Mr. Burkham.

"With all my heart and soul."

"Good. Then you must go to Dr. Jedd instantly. Tell him all you know—Tom Halliday's death; the symptoms of Charlotte's decline, as you have heard them from me—*everything;* and let him hold himself in readiness to start for Hastings directly he hears from or sees me. I am going to a man who of all men can tell me how to deal with Philip Sheldon. I shall try to be in Burlington Row in an hour from this time; but in any case you will wait there till I come. I suppose, in a desperate case like this, Dr. Jedd will put aside all less urgent work?"

"No doubt of that."

"I trust to you to secure his sympathy," said Valentine.

He was in the darksome entrance-hall by this time. Mr. Burkham followed, and opened the door for him.

"Have no fear of me," he said. "Good bye."

The two men shook hands with a grip significant as masonic sign-manual. It meant on the one part hearty co-operation, on the other implicit confidence. In the next moment Valentine sprang into the cab.

"King's Road—entrance to Gray's Inn, and drive like mad!" he shouted to the driver. The hansom rattled across the stones, dashed round corners, struck consternation to scudding children in pinafores, all but annihilated more than one perambulator, and in less than ten minutes after leaving Mr. Burkham's door, ground against the kerbstone before the little gate of Gray's Inn.

"God grant that George Sheldon may be at home!" Valentine said to himself, as he hurried towards that gentleman's office. George Sheldon was at home. In this fight against time, Mr. Hawkehurst had so far found the odds in his favour.

"Bless my soul!" exclaimed the lawyer, looking up from his desk, as Valentine appeared on the threshold of the door, pale and breathless; "to what do I owe the unusual honour of a

visit from Mr. Hawkehurst? I thought that rising *littérateur* had cut all old acquaintances, and gone in for the upper circles."

"I have come to you on a matter of life and death, George Sheldon," said Valentine; "this is no time to talk of why I haven't been to you before. When you and I last met, you advised me to beware of your brother Philip. It wasn't the first, or the second, or the third time that you so warned me. And now speak out like an honest man, and tell me what you meant by that warning? For God's sake, speak plainly this time."

"I cannot afford to speak more plainly than I have spoken half a dozen times already. I told you to beware of my brother Phil, and I meant that warning in its fullest significance. If you had chosen to take my advice, you would have placed Charlotte Halliday's fortune, and Charlotte Halliday herself, beyond his power, by an immediate marriage. You didn't choose to do that, and there was an end of the matter. I have been a heavy loser by your pigheaded obstinacy; and I dare say before you and Phil Sheldon have done with each other, you too will find yourself a loser."

"God help me, yes!" cried Valentine, with a groan; "I stand to make the heaviest loss that was ever made by man."

"What do you mean?" exclaimed George.

"Shall I tell you what you meant when you warned me against your own brother? Shall I tell you why you so warned me? You know that Philip Sheldon murdered Tom Halliday."

"Great God!"

"Yes; the secret is out. You knew it; how or when you discovered it I cannot tell. You knew of that one hellish crime, and would have prevented the commission of a second murder. You should have spoken more plainly. To know what you knew, and to confine yourself to cautious hints and vague suggestions, as you did, was to have part in that devilish work. If Charlotte Halliday dies, her blood be upon your head—upon yours—as well as upon his!"

The young man had risen in his passion, and stood before George Sheldon with uplifted hands, and eyes that flashed angry lightnings. It seemed almost as if he would have called down the Divine vengeance upon this man's head.

"*If* Charlotte Halliday dies!" repeated George, in a horror-stricken whisper; "why should you suggest such a thing?"

"Because she is dying."

There was a pause. Valentine flung himself passionately upon the chair from which he had just risen, with his back to George Sheldon, and his face bent over the back of the chair.

The lawyer sat looking straight before him, with a ghastly countenance.

"I told him he meant *this*," he said to himself, in a hoarse whisper. "I told him in this office not six months ago. Powers of hell, what a villain he is! And there are people who do not believe there is a devil!"

For a few moments Valentine gave free vent to his passion of grief. These tears of rage, of agony the most supreme, were the first he had shed since he had bent his face over Charlotte's soft brown hair, to hide the evidence of his sorrow. When he had dashed these bitter drops away from his burning eyes, he turned to confront George Sheldon, pale as death, but very calm. And after this he gave way no more to his passion. He was matched against Time, of all enemies the most pitiless and unrelenting, and every minute wasted was a point scored by his foe.

"I want your help, George Sheldon," he said. "If you have ever been sorry that you made no effort to save Charlotte Halliday's father, prove yourself his friend by trying to save her."

"*If* I have ever been sorry!" echoed the lawyer. "Why, my miserable dreams have never been free from the horror of that man's face. You don't know what it is—murder! Nobody knows who hasn't been concerned in it. You read of murders in your newspapers. A shot B, or C poisoned D, and so on, all through the letters of the alphabet, with a fresh batch for every Sunday; but it never comes home to you. You think of the horror of it in a shadowy kind of way, as you might think of having a snake twisted round your waist and legs, like that blessed man and boys one never sees the last of. But if you were to look at that plaster cast all your life, you couldn't realize ten per cent. of the horror you'd feel if the snake was *there*, alive, crushing your bones, and hissing in your ear. I have been face to face with murder, Valentine Hawkehurst; and if I were to live a century, I should never forget what I felt when I stood by Tom Halliday's deathbed, and it flashed upon me, all at once, that my brother Phil was poisoning him."

"And you did not try to save him—your friend?" cried Valentine.

"Why, you see," replied the other, in a strange slow way, "it was too late to save him: I knew that, and—I held my tongue. What could I do? Against my own brother! That sort of thing in a family is ruin for every one! Do you think anybody would have brought their business to me after my brother had stood in the Old Bailey dock to take his trial for murder? No; my only course was to keep my own counsel, and I kept it. Phil

made eighteen thousand pounds by his marriage with poor Tom's widow, and a paltry hundred or two is all *I* ever touched of that money."

"And you *could* touch that money?" cried Valentine, aghast.

"Money carries no infection. Did you ever ask any questions about the money you won at German gaming-tables. I dare say some of your napoleons and ten-thaler notes could have told queer stories if they had been able to talk. Taking Phil's money has never weighed upon my conscience. I'm not very inquisitive about the antecedents of a five-pound note; but I'll tell you what it is, Hawkehurst, I'd give all I have, and all I ever hope to have, and would go out and sweep a crossing to-morrow, if I could get Tom Halliday's face out of my mind, with the look that he turned upon me the last time I saw him. 'Ah, George,' he said, 'in illness a man feels the comfort of being among friends!' And he took my hand and squeezed it, in his old hearty way. We had been boys together, Hawkehurst, birds-nesting in Hyley Woods; on the same side in our Barlingford cricket-matches. And I shook his hand, and went away, and left him to die!"

And here Mr. Sheldon of Gray's Inn, the Sheldon who was in with the money-lenders, sharpest of legal prestigiators, most ruthless of opponents, most unscrupulous of allies, buried his face in a flaming bandanna, and fairly sobbed aloud. When the passion had passed, he got up and walked hastily to the window, more ashamed of this one touch of honest emotion than of all the falsehoods and chicaneries of his career.

"I didn't think I could have been such an ass," he muttered sheepishly.

"I did not hope that you could feel so deeply," answered Valentine. "And now help me to save the only child of your ill-fated friend. I am sure that you can help me."

Without waiting to be questioned, Valentine related the circumstances of Charlotte's illness, and of his interview with Mr. Burkham.

"I did not even know that the poor girl was ill," said George Sheldon. "I have not seen Phil for months. He came here one day, and I gave him a bit of my mind. I told him if he tried to harm her I'd let the light in upon him and his doings. And I'll keep my word."

"But his motive? What, in the name of Heaven, can be his motive for taking her innocent life? He knows of the Haygarth estate, and must hope to profit by her fortune if she lives."

"Yes, and to secure the whole of that fortune if she dies. Her death would make her mother sole heir to that estate, and the mother is the merest tool in his hands. He may even have

induced Charlotte to make a will in his favour, so that he himself may stand in her shoes."

"She would not have made a will without telling me of it."

"You don't know that. My brother Phil can do anything. It would be as easy for him to persuade her to maintain secrecy about the transaction as to persuade her to make the will. Do you suppose *he* shrinks from multiplying lies and forgeries and hypocrisies? Do you suppose anything in that small way comes amiss to the man who has once brought his mind to murder? Why, look at the Scotch play of that fellow Shakespeare's. At the beginning, your Macbeth is a respectable trustworthy sort of person, anxious to get on in life, and so on, and that's all; but no sooner has he made an end of poor old Duncan, than he lays about him right and left—Banquo, Fleance, anybody and everybody that happens to be in his way. It was lucky for that Tartar of a wife of his that *she* hook'd it, or he'd soon have put a stop to her sleep-walking. There's no such wide difference between a man and a tiger, after all. The tiger's a decent fellow enough till he has tasted human blood; but when once he *has*, Lord save the country-side from the jaws of the man-eater!"

"For Heaven's sake let us waste no time in talk!" Valentine cried, impetuously. "I am to meet Burkham in Burlington Row directly I have got your advice."

"What for?"

"To see Dr. Jedd, and take him down to Hastings, if possible."

"That won't do."

"Why not?"

"Because Jedd's appearance would give Phil the office. Jedd gave evidence on the Fryar trial, and must be a marked man to him. All Jedd can tell you is that Charlotte is being poisoned. You know that already. Of course she'll want medical treatment, and so on, to bring her round; but she can't get that under my brother's roof. What you have to do is to get her away from that house."

"You do not know how ill she is. I doubt if she could bear the removal."

"Anything is better than to remain. *That* is certain death."

"But your brother would surely dispute her removal."

"He would, and oppose it inch by inch. We must get him away, before we attempt to remove her."

"How?"

"I will find the means for that. I know something of his business relations, and can invent some false cry for luring him off the trail. We *must* get him away. The poor girl was not in actual danger when you left her, was she?"

"No, thank God, there was no appearance of immediate

danger. But she was very ill. And that man holds her life in his hand. He knows that I have come to London in search of a doctor. What if——"

"Keep yourself quiet, Hawkehurst. He will not hasten her death unless he is desperate; for a death occurring immediately after your first expression of alarm would seem sudden. He'll avoid any appearance of suddenness, if he can, depend upon it. The first thing is to get him away. But the question is, how to do it? There must be a bait. What bait? Don't talk to me, Hawkehurst. Let me think it out, if I can."

The lawyer leaned his elbows on the table, and abandoned himself to profound cogitation, with his forehead supported by his clenched hands. Valentine waited patiently while he thus cogitated.

"I must go down to Phil's office," he said at last, "and ferret out some of his secrets. Nothing but stock-exchange business, of an important character, would induce him to leave Charlotte Halliday. But if I can telegraph such a message as will bring him to town, I'll do it. Leave all that to me. And now, what about your work?"

"I am at a loss what to do, if I am not to take Dr. Jedd to Harold's Hill."

"Take him to St. Leonards; and if I get my brother out of the way, you can have Charlotte conveyed to an hotel in St. Leonard's, where she can stop till she picks up strength enough to come to London."

"Do you think her mother will consent to her removal?"

"Do I think you will be such an idiot as to ask for her consent?" cried George Sheldon impatiently. "My brother's wife is so weak a fool, that the chances are she'd insist on her daughter stopping quietly, to be poisoned. No; you must get Mrs. Sheldon out of the way somehow. Send her to look at the shops, or to bathe, or to pick up shells on the beach, or anything else equally inane. She's easy enough to deal with. There's that young woman, Paget's daughter, with them still, I suppose? Yes. Very well, then, you and she can get Charlotte away between you."

"But for me to take those two girls to an hotel—the chance of scandal, of wonder, of inquiry? There ought to be some other person—some nurse. Stay, there's Nancy Woolper—the very woman! My darling has told me of that old woman's affectionate anxiety about her health—an anxiety which was singularly intense, it seemed to Lotta. Good God! do you think she, Nancy Woolper, could have suspected the cause of Mr. Halliday's death?"

'I dare say she did. She was in the house when he died, and nursed him all through his illness. She's a clever old woman.

Yes, you might take her down with you; I think she would be of use in getting Charlotte away."

"I'll take her, if she will go."

"I am not sure of that; our north-country folks have stiffish notions about fidelity to old masters, and that kind of thing. Nancy Woolper nursed my brother Phil."

"If she knows or suspects the fate of Charlotte's father, she will try to save Charlotte," said Valentine, with conviction. "And now, good bye! I trust to you for getting your brother out of the way, George Sheldon; remember that."

He held out his hand; the lawyer took it with a muscular grip, which, on this occasion, meant something more than that base coin of jolly good fellowship which so often passes current for friendship's virgin gold.

"You may trust me," George Sheldon said gravely. "Stop a moment, though; I have a proposition to make. If my brother Philip has induced that girl to make a will, as it is my belief he has, we must counter him. Come down with me to Doctors' Commons. You've a cab? Yes; the business won't take half an hour."

"What business?"

"A special licence for your marriage with Charlotte Halliday."

"A marriage?"

"Yes; her marriage invalidates her will, if she has made one, and does away with Phil's motive. Come along; we'll get the licence."

"But the delay?"

"Exactly half an hour. Come!"

The lawyer dashed out of his office. "At home in an hour," he shouted to the clerk, and then ran downstairs, followed closely by Valentine, and did not cease running until he was in the King's Road, where the cab was waiting.

"Newgate Street and Warwick Lane to Doctors' Commons!" he cried to the cabman; and Valentine was fain to take his seat in the cab without further remonstrance.

"I don't understand——" he began, as the cabman drove away.

"I do. It's all right; you'll put the licence in your pocket, and call at the church nearest which you hang out, Edgware Road way, give notice of the marriage, and so on; and as soon as Charlotte can bear the journey, bring her to London and marry her. I told you your course six months ago. Your obstinacy has caused the hazard of that young woman's life. Don't let us have a second edition of it."

"I will be governed by your advice," answered Valentine, submissively. "It is the delay that tortures me."

The delay was indeed torture to him. Everything and everybody in Doctors' Commons seemed the very incarnation of slowness. The hansom cab might tear and grind the pavement, the hansom cabman might swear until even monster waggons swerved aside to give him passage; but neither tearing nor swearing could move the incarnate stolidity of Doctors' Commons. When he left that quaint sanctuary of old usages, he carried with him the Archbishop of Canterbury's benign permission for his union with Charlotte Halliday. But he knew not whether it was only a morsel of waste paper which he carried in his pocket; and whether there might not ere long be need of a ghastlier certificate, giving leave and licence for the rendering back of "ashes to ashes, and dust to dust."

Valentine's first call, after leaving George Sheldon at the gate of Doctors' Commons, was at the head-quarters of the Ragamuffins. His heart sank as he ran into the bar of the hostelry to ask for the telegram which might be waiting for him.

Happily there was no telegram. To find no tidings of a change for the worse seemed to him almost equivalent to hearing of a change for the better. What had he not feared after his interview with the surgeon of Bloomsbury!

From Covent Garden the hansom bowled swiftly to Burlington Row. Here Valentine found Mr. Burkham, pale and anxious, waiting in a little den of a third room on the ground-floor—a ghastly little room, hung with anatomical plates, and with some wax preparations in jars, on the mantelpiece, by way of ornament. To them presently came Dr. Jedd, as lively and business-like as if Miss Halliday's case had been a question of taking out a double-tooth.

"Very sad!" he said; "these vegetable poisons—hands of unscrupulous man. Very interesting article in the *Medical Quarterly*—speculative analysis of the science of toxicology as known to the ancients."

"You will come down to Harold's Hill at once, sir?" said Valentine, imploringly.

"Well, yes; your friend here, Mr. Burkham, has persuaded me to do so, though I need hardly tell you that such a journey will be to the last degree inconvenient."

"It is an affair of life and death," faltered the young man.

"Of course, my dear sir. But then, you see, I have half-a-dozen other affairs of life and death on my hands at this moment. However, I have promised. My consultations will be over in half an hour; I have a round of visits after that, and by—well, say by the five o'clock express, I will go to St. Leonards."

"The delay will be very long," said Valentine.

"It cannot be done sooner. I ought to go down to Hert-

fordshire this evening—most interesting case—carbuncle—three operations in three consecutive weeks—Swain as operator. At five o'clock I shall be at the London Bridge station. Until then, gentlemen, good day. Lawson, the door."

Dr. Jedd left his visitors to follow the respectable white-cravatted butler, and darted back to his consulting-room.

Mr. Burkham and Valentine walked slowly up and down Burlington Row before the latter returned to his cab.

"I thank you heartily for your help," said Valentine to the surgeon; "and I believe, with God's grace, we shall save this dear girl's life. It was the hand of Providence that guided me to you this morning. I can but believe the same hand will guide me to the end."

On this they parted. Valentine told his cabman to drive to the Edgware Road; and in one of the churches of the immediate neighbourhood of that thoroughfare he gave notice of his intention to enter the bonds of holy matrimony. He had some difficulty in arranging matters with the clerk, whom he saw in his private abode and non-official guise. That functionary was scarcely able to grasp the idea of an intending Benedick who would not state positively when he wanted to be married. Happily, however, the administration of half-a-sovereign considerably brightened the clerk's perceptions.

"I see what you want," he said. "Young lady a invalid, which she wants to leave her home as she finds uncomfortable, she being over twenty-one years of age and her own mistress. It's what you may call a runaway match, although the parties ain't beholden to any one, in a manner of speaking. *I* understand. You give me half an hour's notice any morning within the legal hours, and I'll have one of our young curates ready for you as soon as you're ready for them; and have you and the young lady tied up tight enough before you know where you are. We ain't very long over *our* marriages, unless it is something out of the common way."

The clerk's familiarity was more good-natured than flattering to the applicant's self-esteem; but Valentine was in no mood to object to this easy-going treatment of the affair. He promised to give the clerk the required notice; and having arranged everything in strictly legal manner, hurried back to his cab, and directed the man to drive to the Lawn.

It was now three o'clock. At five he was to meet Dr. Jedd at the station. He had two hours for his interview with Nancy Woolper, and his drive from Bayswater to London Bridge.

He had tasted nothing since daybreak; but the necessity to eat and drink never occurred to him. He was dimly conscious of feeling sick and faint, but the reason of this sickness and faintness did not enter into his thoughts. He took off his hat,

and leant his head back against the cushion of the hansom as that vehicle rattled across the squares of Paddington. The summer day, the waving of green trees in those suburban squares; the busy life and motion of the world through which he went, mixed themselves into one jarring whirl of light and colour, noise and motion. He found himself wondering how long it was since he left Harold's Hill. Between the summer morning in which he had walked along the dusty high-road, with fields of ripening corn upon his left, and all the broad blue sea upon his right, and the summer afternoon in which he drove in a jingling cab through the noisy streets and squares of Bayswater, there seemed to him a gulf so wide, that his tried brain shrank from scanning it.

He struggled with this feeling of nelplessness and bewilderment, and overcame it.

"Let me remember what I have to do," he said to himself; "and let me keep my wits about me till that is done."

CHAPTER II.

PHŒNICIANS ARE RISING.

While Mr. Hawkehurst arranged his affairs with the clerk of St. Matthias-in-the-fields, in the parish of Marylebone, George Sheldon sat in his brother's office writing a letter to that distinguished stockbroker. The pretext of writing a letter was the simplest pretext for being alone in his brother's room; and to be alone in Philip Sheldon's room was the first step in the business which George had to do.

The room was distractingly neat, and as handsomely furnished as it is possible for an office to be within the closest official limits. A Spanish mahogany desk with a cylinder cover, and innumerable drawers fitted with invisible Bramah locks, occupied the centre of the room; and four ponderous Spanish mahogany chairs, with padded backs, and seats covered with crimson morocco, were primly ranged against the wall. Upon the mantelpiece ticked a skeleton clock; above which there hung the starnest and grimmest of almanacks, on either whereof were fastened divers lists and calendars of awful character, affected by gentlemen on 'Change.

Before penetrating to this innermost and sacred chamber, George Sheldon wasted some little time in agreeable gossip with a gentleman whom he found yawning over the *Times* newspaper in an outer and less richly furnished apartment. This gentleman was Philip Sheldon's clerk, the younger son of a rich Yorkshire farmer, who had come to London with the intention of

making his fortune on the Stock Exchange, and whose father had paid a considerable sum in order to obtain for this young man the privilege of reading the *Times* in Mr. Sheldon's office, and picking up whatever knowledge might be obtained from the business transactions of his employer.

The career of Philip Sheldon had been watched with some interest by his fellow-townsmen of Barlingford. They had seen him leave that town with a few hundreds in his pocket, and they had heard of him twelve years afterwards as a prosperous stock-broker, with a handsome house and a handsome carriage, and the reputation of being one of the sharpest men in the City. The accounts of him that came to Barlingford were all more or less exaggerated; and the men who discussed his cleverness and his good luck were apt to forget that he owed the beginning of his fortunes to Tom Halliday's eighteen thousand pounds. The one fact that impressed Philip Sheldon's townsmen was the fact that a Barlingford man had made money on the Stock Exchange; and the one inference they drew therefrom was the inference that other Barlingford men might do the same.

Thus it had happened that Mr. Stephen Orcott, of Plymley Rise farm, near Barlingford, being at a loss what to do with a somewhat refractory younger son, resolved upon planting his footsteps in the path so victoriously trodden by Philip Sheldon. He wrote to Philip, asking him to receive the young man as clerk, assistant, secretary—anything, with a view to an ultimate junior partnership; and Philip consented, upon certain conditions. The sum he demanded was rather a stiff one, as it seemed to Stephen Orcott, but he opined that such a sum would not have been asked if the advantages had not been proportionately large. The bargain was therefore concluded, and Mr. Frederick Orcott came to London. He was a young man of horsey propensities, gifted with a sublime contempt for any kind of business requiring application or industry, and with a supreme belief in his own merits.

George Sheldon had known Frederick Orcott as a boy, and had been in his society some half-dozen times since his coming to London. He apprehended no difficulty in obtaining from this young gentleman any information he had the power to afford.

"How do, Orcott?" he said, with agreeable familiarity. "My brother Phil not come back yet?"

"No," replied the other, sulkily. "There have been ever so many people here bothering me about him. Where has he gone? and when will he be back? and so on. I might as well be some d—d footman, if I'm to sit here answering questions all day. High Wickham races are on to-day, and I wanted to see Barmaid run before I put my money on her for Goodwood. She was bred down our way, you see, and I know she's like enough

to win the cup, if she's fit. They don't know much about her this way, either, though she's own sister to Boots, that won the Chester Cup last year, owing to Topham's being swindled into letting him off with seven lbs. He ran at the York Spring, you see, for a twopenny-halfpenny plate, and the boy that rode him pulled his head half off—I saw him do it—and then he won the Chester, and brought his owners a pot of money."

This information was not exactly what George Sheldon wanted, but he planted himself on the hearthrug in an easy attitude, with his back against the mantelpiece, and appeared much interested in Mr. Orcott's discourse.

"Anything stirring in the City?" he asked presently.

"Stirring? No—nothing stirring but stagnation, as some fellow said in a play I saw the other night. Barlingford folks say your brother Philip has made a heap of money on the Stock Exchange; but if he has, he must have done a good deal more business before I came to him than he has done lately. I can't see how a man is to develop into a Rothschild out of an occasional two-and-sixpence per cent. on the transfer of some old woman's savings from railway stock to consols; and that's about the only kind of business I've seen much of lately. Of course Phil Sheldon has got irons of his own in the fire; for he's an uncommonly deep card, you see, that brother of yours, and it isn't to be expected he'll tell *me* all he's up to. I know he's up to his eyebrows in companies, but I don't see how he's to make his fortune out of *them*, for limited liability now-a-days seems only another name for unlimited crash. However, I don't care. It pleased my governor to get me into Sheldon's office, and it suited my book to come to London; but if the author of my being thinks I'm going to addle my blessed brains with the decline and fall of the money market, he's a greater fool than I took him for—and that's saying a great deal."

And here Mr. Frederick Orcott lapsed into admiring contemplation of his boots, which were the *chefs-d'œuvre* of a sporting bootmaker; boots that were of the ring, ringy, and of the corner, cornery.

"Ah," said George, "and Phil doesn't tell you much of his affairs, doesn't he? That's rather a bad sign, I should think. Looks as if he was rather down upon his luck, eh?"

"Well, there's no knowing, you see, with that sort of close fish. He may have made his book for a great haul, and may be keeping himself quiet till the event comes off. He may be laying on to something with all his might, you know, on safe information. But there's one thing I know he stands to lose by."

"What's that?"

"The Phœnician Loan. He speculated in the bonds when they began to go down; and I'm blessed if they haven't been

dropping ever since, an eighth a day, as regular as the day comes round. He bought them for the March account, and has been paying contango since then, and holding on in hopes of a rise. I don't know whether the purchase was a large one, but I know he's been uncommonly savage about the drop. He bought on the strength of private information from the other side of the Channel. The Emperor was putting his own money into the Phœnician business, and it was the best game out, and so on. But he seems to have been made a fool of, for once in a way."

"The bonds may steady themselves."

"Yes, they *may*; but, on the other hand, they mayn't. There are the Stock Exchange lists, with Phœnicians ticked off by your brother's own pen. A steady drop, you see. 'Let me have a telegram if there's a sudden rise,' said Sheldon to me the day he left London; 'they'll go up with rush when they do move.' But they've been moving the other way ever since; and I think if he stayed away till doomsday it would be pretty much the same."

"*Phœnicians are rising rapidly. Come back to town.*"

These were the words of the telegraphic despatch which shaped itself in George Sheldon's brain, as his brother's clerk revealed the secrets of his employer.

It was found—the solution of the one great question as to how Philip Sheldon was to be lured away from the bedside of his unconscious victim. Here was the bait.

"I knew I could do it; I knew I could get all I wanted to know out of this shallow-brained idiot," he said to himself, triumphantly.

And then he told the shallow-brained idiot that he thought he would write a line to his brother; and on that pretence went into Philip's office.

Here, use his eyes as he might, he could discover nothing; he could glean no stray scrap of information. The secrets that could be guarded by concealed Bramah locks and iron safes, with mystic words to be learned by the man who would open them, Philip Sheldon knew how to protect. Unhappily for himself, he had been compelled to confide some of his secrets to human receptacles not to be guarded by Bramah locks or mystic words.

The lawyer did not waste much time in his brother's office. A very hasty investigation showed him there was nothing to be learned from those bare walls and that inviolable cylinder-topped desk. He scribbled a few lines of commonplace at a table by the window, sealed and addressed his note, and then departed to despatch his telegram. "Phœnicians are rising

rapidly," he wrote, and that was all. He signed the despatch Frederick Orcott.

"Phil and Orcott may settle the business between them," he said to himself, as he forged the Yorkshireman's name. "What I have to do is to get Phil away, and give Hawkehurst a chance of saving Tom Halliday's daughter; and I shan't stand upon trifles in the doing of it."

After having despatched this telegram, George Sheldon found himself much too restless and excited for ordinary business. He, so renowned even amongst cool hands for exceptional coolness, was on this occasion thoroughly unnerved. He dropped into a City tavern, and refreshed himself with a dram. But, amidst all the bustle and clatter of a crowded bar, the face of Tom Halliday, haggard and worn with illness, was before his eyes, and the sound of Tom Halliday's voice was in his ears. "I can't settle to anything this afternoon," he said to himself. "I'll run down to Bayswater, and see whether Hawkehurst has managed matters with Nancy Woolper."

CHAPTER III.

THE SORTES VIRGILIANÆ.

WHILE George Sheldon was still in the depths of the City Valentine Hawkehurst arrived at the gothic villa, where he asked to see Mrs. Woolper. Of the woman herself he knew very little: he had seen her once or twice when some special mission brought her to the drawing-room; and from Charlotte he had heard much of her affectionate solicitude. To have been kind to his Charlotte was the strongest claim to his regard.

"This woman's help would be of inestimable service," he thought; "her age, her experience of sickness, her familiarity with the patient, especially adapt her for the office she will be required to fill. If Dr. Jedd should order a nurse to watch by the sick-bed, here is the nurse. If it should prove possible to remove the dear sufferer, here is the guardian best calculated to protect and attend her removal." That the desperate step of an immediate marriage would be a wise step Valentine could not doubt, since it would at once annihilate Mr. Sheldon's chances, and destroy his motive. But in contemplating this desperate step Valentine had to consider the reputation as well as the safety of his future wife. He was determined that there should be no opportunity for scandal in the circumstances of his stolen marriage no scope for future mischief from the malignity of that baffled villain to whose schemes their marriage would

give the death-blow. He, who from his cradle had been familiar with the darker side of life, knew how often the innocent carry a lifelong burden, and perform a perpetual pennance for the sins or the follies of others. And over his darling's life in the future, should it please God that he might save her, he would have no shadow cast by imprudence of his in the present.

"This sharp-witted, sharp-tongued Yorkshirewoman will be the woman of women to protect her," he thought, as he seated himself in Mr. Sheldon's study, whither the prim parlour-maid had ushered him.

"Mrs. Woolper have just gone upstairs to clean herself," she said; "which we are a-having the dining-room and droring-room carpets up, while the family are away. Would you please to wait?"

Valentine looked at his watch.

"I cannot wait very long," he said; "and I shall be obliged if you will tell Mrs. Woolper that I wish to see her on very important business."

The parlour-maid departed, and Valentine was left to endure the weariness of waiting until Mrs. Woolper should have "cleaned herself."

Mr. Sheldon's study at Bayswater did not offer much more to the eye of the investigator than Mr. Sheldon's office in the City. There were the handsomely bound books behind the inviolable plate-glass doors, and there was the neat writing-table with the machine for weighing letters, and the large business-like looking blotting-pad, and the ponderous brass-rimmed inkstand, with no nonsense about it; and yonder, on a clumsy little oak table with thick legs, appeared the copying machine, with a big black iron lever, and a massive screw with which to screw all the spontaneous feeling out of every letter that came beneath its crushing influence.

Up and down this joyless den Valentine Hawkehurst paced, with the demon of impatience raging in his breast. The July sunshine blazed hot upon the window, and the voices of croquêt-players in adjacent gardens rose shrill upon the summer air. And there were girls playing croquêt while she, his "rose of the garden, garden of girls," lay sick unto death! O, why could he not offer a hecatomb of these common creatures as a substitute for that one fair spirit?

He looked into the garden—the prim modern garden, but a few years reclaimed from that abomination of desolation, the "eligible lot of building land." Across the well-kept lawn there brooded no shadow of Old-World cedar; no century-old espaliers divided flower and kitchen ground; no box-edging of the early Hanoverian era bordered the beds of roses and mignonette.

From one boundary-wall to the other there was not a bush old enough to hang an association upon. The stereotyped bed of flaming yellow calceolaria balanced the conventional bed of flaming crimson verbena; the lavender heliotrope faced the scarlet geranium, like the four corners in a quadrille. The garden was the modern nurserymen's ideal of suburban horticulture, and no more. But to Valentine this half-acre of smooth lawn and Wimbledon gravel pathway had seemed fair as those pleasure gardens of Semiramis, at the foot of the Bagistanos mountain, the fame whereof tempted Alexander to turn aside from the direct road, during his march from Chelone to the Nysaïc horse pastures.

To-day the contemplation of that commonplace garden gave him direful pain. Should he ever walk there again with his dear love, or in any other garden upon earth?

And then he thought of fairer gardens, in supernal regions whither his soul was slow to travel. "Not easy is the journey from earth to the stars," says the sage; and from this young wanderer the stain of earthly travel had yet to be washed away.

"If she is taken from me, shall I ever be pure enough to follow her?" he asked himself. "Will a life that began in such darkness ever rise to the light which is her natural element? If she is taken, and I stay behind, and bear my burden patiently in the hope to follow her, will there not be a gate closed against me in the skies, beyond which I shall see her, shining among her kindred spirits, in the white robes of perfect innocence? Ah, my love, my love, as between us on this earth must for ever be a gulf your pure soul cannot pass, so between us in the skies will rise a barrier to sever me from your sweet company!"

The thought of probable separation upon earth, of possible separation in heaven, was too bitter to him.

"I will not think of these things," he said to himself; "I will not believe in that possibility of this sacrifice. Ah, no! she will be saved. Against the bright young life the awful fiat has not gone forth. Providence has been with me to-day. Providence will go with me till the end."

He thought how other men had so stood, as he was standing now, face to face with the great uncertainty, the crisis, the turning-point—the pivot on which life itself revolved. The pendulum of the mighty clock swings solemnly to and fro; with every vibration a moment; with every moment each man's shrouded fates move another step in their inexorable progress. And the end? What was the goal towards which those dark relentless shapes were moving?

He thought of Rousseau, balancing the awful question

of his soul's salvation—his poor weak soul adrift upon a sea of doubt.

"Behold yonder tree which faces me, as I sit and meditate the problem of my destiny—the destiny of me, Jean Jacques Rousseau, self-conscious genius, and future regenerator of my age. I pick up a pebble, and poise it between my fingers before taking my aim. In another moment the question will be answered. If the pebble hits the tree, I, Jean Jacques, am reserved for salvation. If I miss—O awful, overwhelming possibility!—my name will blaze upon that dreadful scroll which numbers the damned."

Happily the tree is bulky, and within but a few yards of the speculator; and the great enigma of the Calvinistic church is answered in favour of Madame de Warenne's protégé, whose propensities and proclivities at that period did not very strongly indicate his claim to a place among the elect.

Valentine remembered the *sortes Virgilianæ*—the Wesleyan's drawing of inferences from Bible texts. Ah, could he not find an answer to the question that was the one thought of his mind? He would find some answer—a lying oracle, perhaps. It might be a voice from heaven,—some temporary assuagement of this storm of doubt that raged in his breast. "I doubt if Mr. Sheldon owns either a Bible or an 'Æneid,'" he said to himself, as he stopped in his rapid pacing of the room; "I will open the first book I can put my hand upon, and from the first line my eye falls on will draw an augury."

He looked about the room. Behind the glazed doors of the mahogany bookcase appeared Hume and Smollett, Scott and Shakespeare; and conspicuous among these a handsome family Bible. But the glazed doors were locked. In Mr. Sheldon's study there appeared to be no other books than these few standard works. Yes, on some obscure little shelves, low down in one of the recesses formed by the projection of the fireplace and the chimney, there were three rows of large quarto volumes, in dingy dark-green cloth cases.

What these volumes might contain Valentine Hawkehurst knew not; and the very fact of his ignorance rendered these books all the more suitable for the purpose of augury. To dip for a sentence into any of these unknown volumes would be a leap in darkness more profound than he could find in the Bible or the "Æneid," where his own foreknowledge of the text might unwittingly influence the oracle. He went over to the recess, bent down, and ran his hand along the backs of the volumes, with his face turned away from the books towards the window.

"The first obstruction that arrests my hand shall determine my choice of the volume," he said to himself.

His hand ran easily along the volumes on the upper shelf—easily along the volumes on the second shelf; and he began to doubt whether this mode of determining his choice could be persisted in. But in its progress along the third and lowest range of volumes, his hand was arrested midway by a book which projected about half an inch beyond its fellows.

He took this book out and carried it to the table, still without looking at it. He opened it, or rather let its leaves fall open of their own accord—still without looking at it; and then, with a strange superstitious fear—mingled in his mind with the natural shame that accompanied his conscious folly—he looked at the page before him. The line on which he fixed his eye was the heading of a letter. It was in larger type than the rest of the page, and it was very plain to him as he stood a little way from the table, looking down at the open book.

The line ran thus:

"On the Fallibility of Copper Gauze as a Test for the Detection of Arsenic."

The book was a volume of the *Lancet;* the date twenty years ago.

"What an oracle!" thought Valentine, with a cynical laugh at his own folly, and some slight sense of relief. In all feeble tamperings with powers invisible there lurks a sense of terror in the weak human heart. He had tempted those invisible ones, and the oracle he only half believed in might have spoken to his confusion and dismay. He was glad to think the oracle meant nothing.

And yet, even in this dryasdust title of a scientific communication from a distinguished toxicologist there was some sinister significance. It was the letter of a great chemist, who demonstrated therein the fallibility of all tests in relation to a certain poison. It was one of those papers which, while they aid the cause of science, may also further the dark processes of the poisoner, by showing him the forces he has to encounter, and the weapons with which he may defend himself from their power. It is needless to dwell here upon the contents of this letter—one of a series on the same subject, of range of subjects. Valentine read it with eager interest. For him it had a terrible importance in its relation to the past and to the present.

"I let the book fall open, and it opened at that letter," he thought to himself. Will it open there a second time, I wonder?"

He repeated the experiment, and the book opened in the same place. Again; and again the book opened as before. Again, many times, and the result was still the same.

After this he examined the book, and found that it had been

pressed open at this page, as by a reader leaning on the opened volume. He examined it still more closely, and found here and there on the page faint indications of a pencil, which had underscored certain lines, and the marks of which had been as far as possible erased. The deduction to be drawn from these small facts seemed only too clear to Valentine Hawkehurst. By some one reader the pages had been deliberately and carefully studied. Could he doubt that reader to have been the man in whose possession he found the book, the man whom that very day he had heard plainly denounced as a poisoner?

He drew out the previous volume, and in this a rapid search revealed to him a second fact, significant as the last.

An old envelope marked the place where appeared an article on the coincidences common to the diagnostics of a certain type of low fever and the diagnostics of a certain class of poisons. Here the volume again opened of itself, and a blot of ink on the page seemed to indicate that the open book had been leant upon by a person engaged in making memoranda of its contents. Nor was this all. The forgotten envelope that marked the place had its own dismal significance. The postmark bore the date of the year and the month in which Charlotte's father had died.

While this volume was still open in his hand the door opened suddenly, and Mrs. Woolper came into the room.

She had kept Valentine waiting more than half an hour. He had little more than half an hour at most in which to break the ice of absolute strangeness, and sound the very depths of this woman's character. If she had come to him earlier, when his plan of action was clear and definite, his imagination in abeyance, he would have gone cautiously to work, with slowness and deliberation. Coming to him now, when his mind, unsettled by the discovery of fresh evidence against Philip Sheldon, was divided between the past and the present, she took him off his guard, and he plunged at once into the subject that absorbed all his thoughts.

Mrs. Woolper looked from Valentine to the open books on the table with a vague terror in her face.

"I am sorry I was so long, sir; but I'd been polishing the grates and fenders, and such like, and my hands and face were blacker than a sweep's. I hope there's nothing wrong at the seaside, where Miss——"

"There is much that's wrong, Mrs. Woolper—hopelessly, irrecoverably wrong. Miss Halliday is ill, very ill—doomed to die, if she remain in your master's keeping."

"Lord help us, Mr. Hawkehurst! what do you mean?"

The terror in her face was no longer a vague terror. It had

taken a form and substance, and was a terror unutterably hideous, if ever human countenance gave expression to human thought.

"I mean that your master is better skilled in the use of the agents that kill than the agents that cure. Charlotte's father came to Philip Sheldon's house a hale strong man, in the very prime of manhood. In that house he sickened of a nameless disease, and died, carefully tended by his watchful friend. The same careful watcher stands by Charlotte Halliday's deathbed, and she is dying!"

"Dying! O, sir, for God's sake, don't say that!"

"She is dying, as her father died before her, by the hand of Philip Sheldon."

"O, sir! Mr. Hawkehurst!" cried the old woman, with clasped hands lifted in piteous supplication towards her master's denouncer. "It's not true. It is not true. For God's dear love don't tell me it is true! I nursed him when he was a baby, sir; and there wasn't a little trouble I had to bear with him that didn't make him all the dearer to me. I have sat up all the night through, sir, times and often, when he was ill, and have heard Barlingford church clock strike every hour of the long night; and O, if I had known that this could ever come to him, I should have wished him dead in the little crib where he lay and seemed so innocent. I tell you, sir, it can't be true! His father and mother had been respected and looked up to in Barlingford for many a year, — his grandfather and grandmother before them. There isn't a name that stands better in those parts than the name of Sheldon. Do you think such a man would poison his friend?"

"*I* said nothing about poison, Mrs. Woolper," said Valentine, sternly.

This woman had known all, and had held her tongue, like the rest, it seemed. To Valentine there was unutterable horror in the thought that a cold-blooded murder could be thus perpetrated in the sight of several people, and yet no voice be raised to denounce the assassin.

"And this is our modern civilization!" he said to himself. "Give me the desert or the jungle. The sons of Bowance are no worse than Mr. Sheldon, and one might be on one's guard against them."

Nancy Woolper looked at him aghast. He had said nothing about poison! What, then—had she betrayed her master?

He saw that she had known, or strongly suspected, the worst in the case of Tom Halliday, and that she would easily be influenced to do all he wanted of her.

"Mrs. Woolper, you must help me to save Charlotte," he

said, with intensity. "You made no attempt to save her father, though you suspected the cause of his death. I have this day seen Mr. Burkham, the doctor who attended Mr. Halliday, and from his lips I have heard the truth. I want you to accompany me to Hastings, and to take your place by Charlotte's bed, as her nurse and guardian. If Mr. Sheldon suspects your knowledge of the past, and I have little doubt that he does"—a look in the housekeeper's face told him that he was right—"you are of all people best fitted to guard that dear girl. Your part will not be a difficult one. If we dare remove her, we will remove her beyond the reach of that man's power. If not, your task will be to prevent food or medicine, that his hand has touched, from approaching her lips. You *can* do it. It will only be a question of tact and firmness. We shall have one of the greatest doctors in London for our guide. Will you come?"

"I don't believe my master poisoned his friend," said Nancy Woolper, doggedly; "nor I won't believe it. You can't force me to think bad of him I loved when he was little and helpless, and I carried him in my arms. What are you and your fine London doctor, Mr. Burkham—he was but a poor fondy, as I mind well—that I should take your word against my master? If that young man thought as Mr. Halliday was being poisoned, why didn't he speak out, like a man, then? It's a fine piece of work to bring it up against my master eleven years afterwards. As for young missy, she's as sweet a young creature as ever lived, and I'd do anything to serve her. But I won't think, and I can't think, that my master would hurt a hair of her head. What would he gain by it?"

"He has settled that with himself. He has gained by the death of Tom Halliday, and depend upon it he has made his plans to gain by the death of Tom Halliday's daughter."

"I won't believe it," the old woman repeated in the same dogged tone.

For such resistance as this Mr. Hawkehurst was in no manner prepared. He looked at his watch. The half hour was nearly gone. There was little more time for argument.

"Great Heaven!" he said to himself, "what argument can I employ to influence this woman's obdurate heart?"

What argument, indeed? He knew of none stronger than those he had used. He stood for some moments baffled and helpless, staring absently at the face of his watch, and wondering what he was to do next.

As Valentine Hawkehurst stood thus, there came a loud ringing of the bell, following quickly on the sound of wheels grinding against the kerb-stone.

Mrs. Woolper opened the door and looked out into the hall.

"It's master!" cried one of the maids, emerging from the disorganized dining-room, "and missus, and Miss Halliday, and Miss Paget—and all the house topsy-turvy!"

"Charlotte here!" exclaimed Valentine. "You are dreaming, girl!"

"And you told me she was dying!" said Mrs. Woolper, with a look of triumph. "What becomes of your fine story now?"

"It *is* Miss Halliday!" cried the housemaid, as she opened the door. "And O my!" she added, looking back into the hall with a sorrowful face, "how bad she do look!"

Valentine ran out to the gate. Yes; there were two cabs, one laden with luggage, the two cabmen busy about the doors of the vehicles, a little group of stragglers waiting to see the invalid young lady alight. It was the next best thing to a funeral.

"O, don't she look white!" cried a shrill girl with a baby in her arms.

"In a decline, I dessay, pore young thing," said a matron, in an audible aside to her companion.

Valentine dashed amongst the group of stragglers. He pushed away the girl with the baby, the housemaid who had run out behind him, Mr. Sheldon, the cabman, every one; and in the next moment Charlotte was in his arms, and he was carrying her into the house.

He felt as if he had been in a dream; and all that exceptional force which the dreamer sometimes feels he felt in this crisis. He carried his dear burden into the study, followed by Mr. Sheldon and Diana Paget. The face that dropped upon his shoulder showed deadly white against his dark-blue coat; the hand which he clasped in his, ah, how listless and feeble!

"Valentine!" the girl said, in a low drowsy voice, lifting her eyes to his face, "is this you? I have been so ill, so tired; and they would bring me away. To be near the doctors, papa says. Do you think any doctors will be able to cure me?"

"Yes, dear, with God's help. I am glad he has brought you here. And now I must run away" he said, when he had placed Charlotte in Mr. Sheldon's arm-chair, "for a very little while, darling. I have seen a doctor, a man in whom I have more confidence than I have in Dr. Doddleson. I am going to fetch him, my dearest," he added tenderly, as he felt the feeble hand cling to his; "I shall not be long. Do you think I shall not hurry back to you? My dearest one, when I return, it will be to stay with you—for ever."

She was too ill to note the significance of his words; she only knew that they gave her comfort. He hurried from the room. In less than an hour he must be at the London Bridge

terminus, or in all probability the five o'clock train would carry Dr. Jedd to St. Leonards; and on Dr. Jedd his chief hope rested.

"Do you believe me now?" he asked of Mrs. Woolper as he went out into the hall.

"I do," she answered in a whisper; "and I will do what you want."

She took his hand in her wrinkled horny palm and grasped it firmly. He felt that in this firm pressure there was a promise sacred as any oath ever registered on earth. He met Mr Sheldon on the threshold, and passed him without a word. The time might come in which he would have to mask his thoughts, and stoop to the hateful hypocrisy of civility to this man; but he had not yet schooled himself to do this. At the gate he met George Sheldon.

"What's up now?" asked the lawyer.

"Did you send your message?"

"Yes; I telegraphed to Phil."

"It has been trouble wasted. He has brought her home."

"What does that mean?"

"Who knows? I pray God that he may have overreached himself. I have set a watch upon my dear love, and no further harm shall come to her. I am going to fetch Dr. Jedd."

"And you are not afraid of Phil's smelling a rat?"

"I am afraid of nothing that he can do henceforward. If it is not too late to save her, I will save her."

He waited for no more, but jumped into the cab.

"London Bridge terminus! You must get me there by a quarter to five," he said to the driver.

George Sheldon went no further than the gate of his brother's domain.

"I wonder whether the Harold's Hill people will send that telegram after him," he thought. "It'll be rather unpleasant for Fred Orcott if they do. But it's ten to one they won't. The normal condition of every seaside lodging-house keeper is one degree removed from idiotcy."

Book the Ninth.

THROUGH THE FURNACE.

CHAPTER I.

SOMETHING TOO MUCH.

"Is that young man mad?" asked Philip Sheldon, as he went into his study immediately after Valentine had passed him in the hall.

The question was not addressed to any particular individual; and Diana, who was standing near the door by which Mr. Sheldon entered, took upon herself to answer it.

"I think he is very anxious," she said in a half whisper.

"What brought him here just now? He did not know we were coming home."

Mrs. Woolper answered this question.

"He came for something for Miss Charlotte, sir; some books as she'd had from the library. They'd not been sent back; and he came to see about their being sent."

"What books?" murmured Charlotte. But a pressure from Mrs. Woolper's hand prevented her saying more.

"I never encountered any one with so little self-command," said Mr. Sheldon. "If he is going to rush in and out of my house in that manner, I must really put a stop to his visits altogether. I cannot suffer that kind of thing. For Charlotte's welfare quiet is indispensable; and if Mr. Hawkehurst's presence is to bring noise and excitement, Mr. Hawkehurst must not cross this threshold."

He spoke with suppressed anger; with such evident effort to restrain his anger, that it would have seemed as if his indignation against Valentine was no common wrath.

Charlotte caught his last words.

"Dear papa," she pleaded in her faint voice, "pray do not be angry with Valentine; he is so anxious about me."

"I am not angry with him; but while you are ill, I will have quiet—at any price."

"Then I'm sure you should not have brought Charlotte home," exclaimed Georgy, in tones of wailing and lamentation; "for of all the miseries in life, there is nothing worse than coming home in the very midst of a general cleaning. It was agreed between Ann Woolper and me that there should be a general cleaning while we were away at the seaside. We were to be away a fortnight, and everything was to be as neat as a new pin when we came home. But here we are back in less than a week, and everything at sixes-and-sevens. Where we are to dine I know not; and as for the carpets, they are all away at the beating-place, and Ann tells me they won't be home till Friday."

"We can exist without carpets," answered Mr. Sheldon, in a hard dry voice. "I suppose they are seeing to Miss Halliday's room?" he added, addressing himself to Mrs. Woolper. "Why don't you go and look after them, Nancy?"

"Sarah knows what she has to do. The bed-rooms was done first; and there's not much amiss in Miss Charlotte's room."

Mr. Sheldon dropped wearily into a chair. He looked pale and haggard. Throughout the journey he had been unfailing in his attention to the invalid; but the journey had been fatiguing; for Charlotte Halliday was very ill—so ill as to be unable to avoid inflicting trouble upon others. The weariness—the dizziness—the dull intervals of semi-consciousness—the helpless tottering walk, which was like the walk of intoxication rather than ordinary weakness—the clouded sight—all the worst symptoms of this nameless disease, had every hour grown more alarming.

Against this journey to London Mrs. Sheldon and Diana had pleaded—Georgy with as much earnestness as she could command; Diana as forcibly as she dared argue a question in which her voice had so little weight.

But upon this point Mr. Sheldon was adamant.

"She will be better off in London," he said resolutely. "This trip to the seaside was a whim of my wife's; and, like most other whims of my wife's, it has entailed trouble and expense upon me. Of course I know that Georgy did it for the best," he added, in reply to a reproachful "O Philip!" from Mrs. Sheldon. "But the whole business has been a mistake. No sooner are we comfortably settled down here, than Hawkehurst takes it into his head to be outrageously alarmed about Charlotte, and wants to bring half-a-dozen doctors round the poor girl's bed, to her inevitable peril; for in an illness which begins and ends in mental depression, all appearance of alarm is calculated to do mischief."

Having said this, Mr. Sheldon lost no time in making arrange-

ments for the journey. A carriage was ordered; all possible preparations were made for the comfort of the invalid—everything that care or kindness could do was done; but the cruelty of the removal was not the less obvious. Georgy wailed piteously about the sixes-and-sevens to which they were being taken. Diana cared nothing about sixes-and-sevens; but she felt supreme indignation against Charlotte's stepfather, and she did not attempt to conceal her feelings.

Nor was it without an effort to oppose Mr. Sheldon's authority that Miss Paget succumbed to the force of circumstances. She appealed to his wife.

"Dear Mrs. Sheldon, I beg you not to suffer Lotta's removal," she said earnestly. "You do not know how ill she is—nor can Mr. Sheldon know, or he would not take such a step. As her mother, your authority is superior to his; you have but to say that she shall not be taken from this house in her present state of prostration and sickness."

"I have only to say!" cried Georgy, piteously. "O Diana, how can you say such a thing? What would be Mr. Sheldon's feelings if I were to stand up against him, and declare that Charlotte should not be moved? And he so anxious too, and so clever. I'm sure his conduct about my poor dear Lotta is positively beautiful. I never saw such anxiety. Why, he has grown ten years older in his looks since the beginning of her illness. People go on about stepfather this, and stepfather that, until a poor young widow is almost frightened to marry again. But I don't believe a real father ever was more thoughtful or more careful about a real daughter than Philip has been about Lotta. And what a poor return it would be if I were to oppose him now, when he says that the removal will be for Charlotte's good, and that she will be near clever doctors—if she should require clever doctors! You don't know how experienced he is, and how thoughtful. I shall never forget his kindness to poor Tom."

"Yes," exclaimed Miss Paget impatiently, "but Mr. Halliday died."

"O Diana," whimpered Georgy, "I did not think you could be so unkind as to remind me of that."

"I only want to remind you that Mr. Sheldon is not infallible."

Mr. Sheldon entered the room at this juncture, and Diana left it, passionately indignant against the poor weak creature, to whom no crisis, no danger, could give strength of mind or will.

"A sheep would make some struggle for her lamb," she thought, angrily. "Mrs. Sheldon is lower than a sheep."

It was the first time she had thought unkindly of this weak soul, and her anger soon melted to pity for the powerless nature which Mr. Sheldon held in such supreme control. She made no further attempt at resistance after this; but went to Charlotte's room and prepared for the journey.

"O, why am I to be moved, dear?" the girl asked piteously. "I am too ill to be moved."

"It is for your good, darling. Mr. Sheldon wants you to be near the great physicians, who can give you health and strength."

"There are no physicians who can do that. Let me stay here, Di. Beg papa to let me stay here."

Diana hid her face upon the invalid's shoulder. Her tears choked her. To repress her grief was agony scarcely endurable. But she did hide all trace of anger and sorrow, and cheered the helpless traveller throughout the weariness of the journey.

Charlotte was lying on a sofa in her bedroom, with Mrs. Woolper in attendance upon her, when Dr. Jedd arrived. It was a quarter to six, and the low western sunshine flooded the room.

The physician came with Valentine, and did not ask to see Mr. Sheldon before going to his patient's room. He told the housemaid who admitted him to show the way to Miss Halliday's room.

"The nurse is there, I suppose?" he said to the girl.

"Yes, sir; leastways, Mrs. Woolper."

"That will do."

Mr. Sheldon heard the voice in the hall, and came out of the library as the doctor mounted the step of the stairs.

"Who is this? What is this?" he asked of Valentine Hawkehurst.

"I told you I was not satisfied with Dr. Doddleson's opinion," answered the young man coolly. "This gentleman is here by appointment with me."

"And pray by what right do you bring a doctor of your own choosing to visit my stepdaughter without previous consultation with me?"

"By the right of my love for her. I am not satisfied as to the medical treatment your stepdaughter has received in this house, Mr. Sheldon, and I want to be satisfied. Miss Halliday is something more than your stepdaughter, remember: she is my promised wife. Dr. Jedd's opinion will be more assuring to me than the opinion of Dr. Doddleson."

At the sound of Dr. Jedd's name Mr. Sheldon started slightly,

It was a name he knew only too well—a name he had seen among the medical witnesses in the great Fryar trial, the record of which had for him possessed a hideous fascination. He had fancied himself in the poisoner Fryar's place; and the fancy had sent an icy chill through his veins. But in the next minute he had said to himself, "I am not such a reckless fool as that man Fryar was; and have run no such risks as he ran."

At the name of Jedd the same icy shiver ran through his veins again. His tone of suppressed anger changed to a tone of civility which was almost sycophantic."

"I have the honour to know Dr. Jedd by repute very well indeed, and I withdraw my objection to your course of proceeding, my dear Hawkehurst; though I am sure Dr. Jedd will agree with me that such a course is completely against all professional etiquette, and that Dr. Doddleson will have the right to consider himself aggrieved."

"There are cases in which one hardly considers professional etiquette. I shall be very happy to meet Dr. Doddleson to-morrow morning. But as Mr. Hawkehurst was very anxious that I should see Miss Halliday to-night, I consented to waive all ceremony, and come with him on the spot."

"I cannot blame his anxiety to secure so valuable an opinion. I only wonder what lucky star guided him to so excellent an adviser."

Mr. Sheldon looked from Dr. Jedd to Valentine Hawkehurst as he said this. The physician's face told him no more than he might have learnt from a blank sheet of paper. Valentine's face was dark and gloomy; but that gloomy darkness might mean no more than natural grief.

"I will take you to my stepdaughter's room at once," he said to the physician.

"I think it will be better for me to see the young lady alone," the doctor answered coolly: "that is to say, in the presence of her nurse only."

"As you please," Mr. Sheldon replied.

He went back to his study. Georgy was sitting there, whimpering in a feeble way at intervals; and near her sat Diana, silent and gloomy. A settled gloom, as of the grave itself, brooded over the house. Mr. Sheldon flung himself into a chair with an impatient gesture. He had sneered at the inconvenience involved in uncarpeted floors, but he was beginning to feel the aggravation of that inconvenience. These two women in his study were insupportable to him. It seemed as if there was no room in the house in which he could be alone; and just now he had bitter need of solitary meditation.

"Let them arrange the dining-room somehow, carpet or no carpet," he said to his wife. "We must have some room to dine in; and I can't have you here, Georgy; I have letters to write."

Mrs. Sheldon and Diana were not slow to take the hint.

"I'm sure I don't want to be here, or anywhere," exclaimed Georgy in piteous accents; "I feel so miserable about Charlotte, that if I could lie down and die, it would be a comfort to me. And it really seems a mockery having dinner at such a time. It's just as it was during poor Tom's illness; there were fowls and all sorts of things cooked, and no one ever ate them."

"For God's sake go away!" cried Mr. Sheldon passionately; "your perpetual clack is torture to me."

Georgy hurried from the room, followed closely by Diana.

"Did you ever see any one more anxious?" Mrs. Sheldon asked, with something like pride.

"I would rather see Mr. Sheldon less anxious!" Diana answered gravely.

CHAPTER II.

DR. JEDD'S OPINION.

Alone, Philip Sheldon breathed more freely. He paced the room, waiting for the appearance of the doctor; and with almost every turn he looked at the clock upon the chimney-piece.

How intolerable seemed the slow progress of the moments! How long that man Jedd was staying in the sick-room! And yet not long; it was he, Philip Sheldon, who was losing count of time. Where was Valentine? He opened the door of the room, and looked out. Yes, there was a figure on the stairs. The lover was waiting the physician's verdict.

A door on the landing above opened, and the step of the octor sounded on the upper flight. Mr. Sheldon waited for r. Jedd's appearance.

"I shall be glad to hear your opinion," he said quietly; and the Doctor followed him into the study. Valentine followed the Doctor, to Mr. Sheldon's evident surprise.

"Mr. Hawkehurst is very anxious to hear what I have to y," said Dr. Jedd; "and I really see no objection to his hearing it."

"If you have no objection, I can have none." Mr. Sheldon

answered. "I must confess, your course of proceeding appears to me altogether exceptional, and——"

"Yes, Mr. Sheldon; but then, you see, the case is altogether an exceptional case," said the physician, gravely.

"You think so?"

"Decidedly. The young lady is in extreme danger. Yes, Mr. Sheldon, in extreme danger. The mistake involved in her removal to-day is a mistake which I cannot denounce too strongly. If you had wanted to kill your stepdaughter, you could scarcely have pursued a more likely course for the attainment of your object. No doubt you were actuated by the most amiable motives. I can only regret that you should have acted without competent advice."

"I believed myself to be acting for the best," replied Philip Sheldon, in a strange mechanical way.

He was trying to estimate the true meaning of the Doctor's address. Was he merely expressing anger against an error of ignorance or stupidity, or was there a more fatal significance in his words?

"You overwhelm me," the stockbroker said presently; "you positively overwhelm me by your view of my daughter's condition. Dr. Doddleson apprehended no danger. He saw our dear girl on Sunday morning—yesterday morning," added Mr. Sheldon, wonder-stricken to find that the interval was so brief between the time in which he had walked with Valentine and Dr. Doddleson in the garden at Harold's Hill and the present moment. To Valentine it seemed still more wonderful. What a bridgeless gulf between yesterday morning and to-night! All his knowledge of this man Sheldon, all the horror involved in Tom Halliday's death, had come upon him in that brief span.

"I should like to see Dr. Doddleson's prescriptions," said Dr. Jedd, with grave politeness.

Mr. Sheldon produced them from his pocket-book with an unshaken hand. No change of countenance, no tremulous hand, no broken voice, betrayed his apprehension. The one distinguishing mark of his manner was an absent, half-mechanical tone, as of a man whose mind is employed otherwise than in the conversation of the moment. Prompt at calculation always, he was at this crisis engaged in a kind of mental arithmetic. "The chances of defeat, so much; the chances of detection ——?"

A rapid survey of his position told him what those chances were. Detection by Dr. Jedd? Yes. *That* had come to him already perhaps. But would any actual harm to him come of such detection?

He calculated the chances for and against this—and the result was in his favour. That Dr. Jedd should form certain opinions of Miss Halliday's case was one thing; that he should give public utterance to those opinions was another thing.

"What can his opinion matter to me?" Mr. Sheldon asked himself; "opinion cannot touch me in a case where there is no such thing as certainty. He has seen the dilatation of the pupil—even that old fool Doddleson saw it—and has taken fright. But no jury in England would hang a man on such evidence as that; or if a jury could be found to put the rope round a man's neck, the British public and the British press would be pretty sure to get the rope taken off again."

"Chloric æther, spirits of ammonia—hum, ha, hum—yes," muttered Dr. Jedd, looking at one prescription. "Quinine, yes; aqua pura," he murmured, looking at another.

He threw them aside with a half-contemptuous gesture, and then took up a pen and began to write.

"My mode of treatment will be quite different from that adopted by Dr. Doddleson," he said; "but I apprehend no difficulty in bringing that gentleman round to my view of the case when we meet."

As he wrote his prescription Philip Sheldon rose and looked over his shoulder.

The form of the prescription told him that Dr. Jedd knew—all! He had suspected this from the first, and the confirmation of this suspicion did not shake him. He grew firmer, indeed; for now he knew on what ground he was standing, and what forces were arrayed against him.

"I really do not understand the basis of your treatment," he said, still looking over the physician's shoulder.

Dr. Jedd turned his chair with a sudden movement, and faced him.

"Am I talking to Mr. Sheldon the stockbroker, or Mr. Sheldon the surgeon-dentist?" he asked.

This was a blow. This allusion to the past was a sharper stroke than any that Philip Sheldon had before received. He looked at Valentine; from Valentine to the physician. What did it mean, this mention of the past? That blabbing fool George had talked to his friend of the days in Fitzgeorge Street, no doubt; and Valentine had blabbed Mr. Sheldon's antecedents to the physician.

Was this what it all meant? Or did it mean more than this? Whatever it might mean, he faced the hidden danger, and met the uncertainties of his position as calmly as he met its certainties.

"I have no desire to interfere with your treatment," he said, very quietly; "but I have some knowledge of the Pharmacopœia, and I confess myself quite at a loss to understand your prescription."

"Dr. Doddleson will understand it when he has heard my opinion. There is no time to be lost—Mr. Hawkehurst, will you take this to the chemist, and wait for the medicine? Miss Halliday cannot take it too soon. I shall be here to-morrow at nine o'clock.—If you wish me to see Dr. Doddleson, Mr. Sheldon, you will perhaps arrange an appointment with him for that hour."

"It is rather an early hour."

"No hour is too early in a case attended with so much danger. Perhaps it will be as well for me to call on Dr. Doddleson as I drive home. I shall make a point of seeing Miss Halliday twice a day. I find your housekeeper a very sensible person. She will remain in close attendance upon the sick-room; and I must beg that there is no quackery—no home-made remedies. I have given your housekeeper all directions as to treatment and diet, and she has my orders to allow no one but herself in the invalid's room. There is a marked tendency to delirium, and quiet is indispensable."

"I have said as much myself," answered Mr. Sheldon.

"Mr. Hawkehurst will undertake to see to the making-up of my prescriptions," continued Dr. Jedd, as he drew on his gloves. "He is very anxious about the young lady, and it will afford him some relief of mind to be employed in her service. No, thanks," he said, putting aside Mr. Sheldon's hand as that gentleman offered him his fee. "I have already received my honorarium from Mr. Hawkehurst."

There was no more to be said. The physician wished the two men good evening, and returned to his carriage, to be driven home to dinner by way of Plantagenet Square, where he saw Dr. Doddleson, and appointed to meet him next day, much to the delight of that individual, who was proud to be engaged in a case with the great Jedd.

Valentine left the house on the heels of the Doctor. He came back in about twenty minutes with the medicine. He did not go to the principal gate, but to a little side gate, near the offices of the gothic villa—a gate to which butchers and bakers came with their wares in the morning.

"I want to see Miss Paget," he said to the maid who answered his summons; "and I want to see her without disturbing Mr. and Mrs. Sheldon. Do you know where to find her?"

"Yes, sir; she's in her own room. I took her a cup of tea there ten minutes ago. She's got a headache with fretting about

our poor young lady, and she won't go down to dinner with master and missus."

"Will you ask her to step out here and speak to me for a few minutes?"

"Won't you come indoors and see her, sir?"

"No; I'd rather see her in the garden."

It was still daylight here, but it was growing shadowy among the avenues in Kensington Gardens. The gate near which Valentine waited was not to be seen from the windows of dining or drawing-room.

The housemaid ran off to summon Miss Paget; and in less than five minutes Diana appeared, dressed in her hat and garden jacket.

"Will you come out into the road with me, dear?" asked Valentine. "I have something serious to say to you."

"And I am so anxious to hear what the Doctor has said," answered Diana, as she took Valentine's arm.

"The road before the Lawn was very quiet at this hour of the evening, and here they were safely beyond Mr. Sheldon's ken.

"Tell me the Doctor's opinion, Valentine," Diana said, eagerly. "Does he think the case very serious?"

"He does. It is more serious than you or I could have imagined, if Providence had not helped me to discover the truth."

"What do you mean, Valentine?"

He gave her in brief the story of his day's work. She listened to him breathlessly, but uttered no exclamation until his story was finished.

"It is most horrible," she said at last; "but I believe it is most true. There has been so much in that man's conduct that has mystified me; and *this* explains all. But what earthly motive can have prompted this hideous crime?"

"He believes that he has a beneficial interest in her death. I cannot fully understand his motive; but, rely upon it, there is a motive, and a sufficient one. And I have let that man delude me into belief in his honesty after I had been warned against him! But there is no time for regrets. Diana, I look to you to help me in saving my dear love."

"It is not too late to save her?"

"Dr. Jedd will commit himself to no positive statement. He tells me she is in danger, but he does not refuse all hope. Now listen, my dear. In that house I have only two people to help me—Ann Woolper and yourself. Ann Woolper I hold only by a feeble bond. I think she will be true to us; but I am not sure of her. Sheldon's influence over her is a powerful one; and God knows what concession he might extort from her. She

is the ostensible guardian of Charlotte's room; you must contrive to be the real guardian. You must keep custody over the custodian. How is your room situated in relation to Charlotte's room?"

"The doors of the two rooms are exactly opposite."

"Providence favours us there. Can you keep watch over Charlotte's door from your room without making your guardianship too apparent?"

"I can."

"Day and night?"

"Day and night."

"God bless you, dear! Her life may be saved by your fidelity."

"I would do as much to render her a smaller service."

"My dear girl! And now go back to the house. Here is the medicine. You will give that into Mrs. Woolper's hands; she has received her instructions from Dr. Jedd, and those instructions leave no room for doubt. If she permits Sheldon to tamper with the medicine or the food of her patient, she will be the wilful accomplice of a murderer. I think she may be trusted."

"I will watch her."

"The charge of procuring the medicine is mine. I shall come to this house many times in the course of every day; but I am bound to prepare myself for the hour in which Mr. Sheldon may forbid me his house. In that event I shall come to this gate. I suppose the servants would stand by me if you pleaded for me?"

"I am sure they would."

"And now, dear, go; the medicine is wanted. I shall come back in a few hours to inquire if there is any change for the better. Go."

They had returned to the gate ere this. He grasped the hand which she held out to him, and stood by the little gate watching her till she had disappeared through the door of the servants' quarters. When the door closed, he walked slowly away. He had done all that it was possible for him to do, and now came his worst misery. There was nothing left for him but to wait the issue of events.

What was he to do? Go home to his lodgings—eat, drink, sleep? Was it possible for him to eat or to sleep while that precious life trembled in the balance? He walked slowly along the endless roads and terraces in a purposeless way. Careless people pushed against him, or he pushed against them; children brushed past him as they ran. What a noisy, busy, clattering world it seemed! And she lay dying! O, the droning, dreary

organs, and the hackneyed, common tunes, how excruciating they were to him to-night!

He emerged into the high road by-and-by, in all the bustle and riot of Notting Hill. The crowded shops, the clamorous people, seemed strange to him. It was like the clamour of a foreign city. He walked on past the bustle and riot, by the quieter terraces near Holland Park, and still held on to Shepherd's Bush, where he went into a little public-house and called for some brandy.

There was a bench on one side of the space in front of the bar, and towards this he pushed his way.

"Where are you shoving to, my young swell?" growled a sturdy cabman, indignant at the outrage inflicted by Valentine's elbows; but in the next moment the sturdy cabman dashed suddenly forward and caught the young swell in his strong arms.

"My eye, young un!" he cried; "where do you want to go to? Here, some one bring a mug of cold water: I'm blest if he ain't in a fit!"

Happily it was no fit, only a dead faint into which Mr. Hawkehurst had fallen. He came back to consciousness presently, after a few spoonfuls of brandy had been forced into his mouth, and looked about him with a helpless stare.

"I'm jiggered if I don't believe he's fainted for the want of wittles!" cried the cabman. "They keeps up till they drop, sometimes, these seedy swells—walks about, lookin' like so many Dossays, on a hempty stomach. Here, some one bring a plate o' cold meat, and look sharp about it. I'll stand sam."

Valentine looked up with a faint smile.

"And I'll stand sam for anything you like to order, my friend," he said, holding out his hand to the good-natured cabman. "I've eaten nothing since last night; but I haven't fasted for want of money. There are worse troubles than an empty pocket,—and I'm not unacquainted with *that*."

"I'm sure I beg your pardon, sir," said the man, sheepishly, very much ashamed of his benevolence; "but, you see, it ain't the fust time I've seen a swell come to the pavement with a cropper, in consequence of having gone it too fast, and cleaned hisself out, in a manner of speaking."

CHAPTER III.

NON DORMIT JUDAS.

The summer darkness closed round the Bayswater villa, but of sleep there was little for any one in that household during this sad night. Is there not, in almost every household, a memory of such days and nights—dread intervals in which the common course of life and time seems to be suspended, and all the interests of the universe hang upon the fitful breath of one dear sufferer?

Lonely were the watchers in Mr. Sheldon's house. Georgy was in her own room, forbidden to disturb the invalid by her restless presence—now lying down, now pacing to and fro, now praying a little, now crying a little—the very ideal of helpless misery.

In the sick-room there was no one but the invalid and Ann Woolper, In the room opposite watched Diana Paget, her door ajar, her senses sharpened by anxiety, quick to hear the faintest sound of footfall on the stairs, or to feel the slightest vibration from steathily opened door on the story below.

Alone in the study sat Philip Sheldon, at the table where he was accustomed to write—a blank sheet of paper before him, a pen held loosely in his outstretched hand, and his eyes fixed in an unseeing gaze upon the bookcase opposite—the living image of care. Now that the turmoil of the day was done, and there was silence in the house, he had set himself to face his position. It was no trifling task which he had to perform. Not one difficulty, or one set of difficulties, had he to meet and master. The armed enemies up-springing from the dragon's teeth which he had sown were not to be set fighting amongst themselves, nor were they to be smashed by any rocks that he could hurl amongst them. They stood around him in an awful circle, and turn which way he would, he saw the same appalling figure, armed to the teeth, and invincible as death.

What had he to fear?

Detection of a past crime? No, that was a fool's terror which shook him at the sound of Tom Halliday's name—a child's fear of the nursery bogie. Detection in the present was more to be dreaded. The work that he had done was, according to his belief, work that could not be proved against him. But there are crimes of which to be accused is to be condemned. Lawyers may plead, and juries may acquit; but the fiat of public opinion goes forth against the suspected wretch, and on *his* forehead for ever shows the dark brand of Cain.

For the criminal of almost every shade of colour, save this one dread hue, society has a sanctuary and earth a refuge. The forger may find a circle in which the signing of another man's name, under the pressure of circumstances, is held to be a misfortune rather than an offence. The swindler has the gentlemanly brotherhood and sisterhood of Macaire for his family, and need never be lonely. The thief may dance away his jovial nights among kindred spirits, and be carried to his grave by sorrowing fellow-artists. The coiner may be jolly in his hiding-place among his chosen band of brother coiners. But for the murderer there is no such thing as human sympathy; and, when the blood of Nancy dyes his cruel hand, Bill Sykes may thank God if he has a dog that will follow him to his wretched end, for from mankind he can hope nothing.

Mr. Sheldon did not contemplate his position from any sentimental point of view; but he told himself that to be suspected of having poisoned his friend, and to be accused of poisoning, or attempting to poison, his daughter, would be ruin—ruin social and commercial, ruin complete and irretrievable.

And having faced one of these dread armed antagonists, he passed on to another shadowy enemy.

What if Charlotte recovered, and he escaped the taint of uttered suspicion—for Dr. Jedd's private opinion he cared very little—what then?

Then the grim antagonist lifted his visor, and showed him the countenance of Commercial Disgrace.

Unless within the next few weeks he could command from eight to ten thousand pounds, his disgrace as a member of the Stock Exchange was inevitable. Charlotte's death would give him the means of raising as much upon the policies of assurance obtained by her, and which, by the terms of her will, he would inherit. The life-insurance people might be somewhat slow to settle his claims; but he had all possible facilities for the raising of money upon any tangible security, and he could count upon immediate cash in the event of Charlotte's death.

But what if she should not die? What if this nameless langnor, this mysterious atrophy, taken vigorously in hand by Dr. Jedd, should be vanquished, and the girl should live?

What indeed? A sharp spasm contracted the stockbroker's hard cold face as he pictured to himself the result of failure.

He saw the crowd of busy faces in the House, and heard the low hum of many voices, and the dull sound of the big half-glass doors swinging to and fro, and the constant tread of hurrying feet. He heard the buzz of voices and the tramp of feet stop as suddenly as if that busy tide of human life had been arrested by an enchanter's wand. The enchanter is no other than the

head-waiter of the Stock Exchange, who takes his position by a stand in the midst of that great meeting-place, and removes his hat.

After that sudden silence comes a faint sound of anxious whisperings; and then again a second silence, still more profound, prevails in that assembly. Three times, with wooden hammer sounding dull against the woodwork of his stand, the waiter raps his awful rap. To some it is the call of doom. The commercial Nemesis hides her awful countenance. Slow and solemn sound those three deliberate strokes of the wooden hammer. You can hear the stertorous breathing of an apoplectic stockbroker, the short panting respiration of some eager speculator—the rest is silence. And then the voice of the waiter —proxy for the commercial Nemesis—calmly enunciates the dread decree.

"Philip Sheldon begs to inform the members of the House that he cannot comply with his bargains."

A sudden flutter of the leaves of many note-books follows that awful announcement. Voices rise loud in united utterance of surprise or indignation. The doors swing to and fro, as hurrying members dash in and out to scan the market and ascertain how far they may be affected by this unlooked-for failure.

This was the scene which the watcher pictured to himself; and for him Fate could wear no aspect more terrible. Respectability, solvency, success—these were the idols to which he had given worship and tribute in all the days of his life. To propitiate these inexorable ones he had sacrificed all the dearest and best blessings which earth and heaven offer to mankind. Rest or happiness, as other men consider these blessings, he had never known; the sense of triumph in success of the present, the feverish expectation of success in the future—these had stood to him in the place of love and hope, pleasure and idlesse, all the joys and comforts of this lower world, and all the holy dreams of purer pleasures in a world to come.

One vague brief thought of all that he had sacrificed flashed across his brain; and swift upon his track followed the thought of what he stood to lose.

Something more than his position upon the Stock Exchange was at stake. He had done desperate things in the vain hope of sustaining that position against the destroying sweep of Fortune's turning tide. Bills were afloat which he must meet, or stand before the world a detected forger,—bills drawn upon companies that were shadowy as the regions of their supposed operations. Bills amounting to five thousand pounds, drawn upon the Honduras Mahogany Company, Limited; other bills,

amounting to upwards of three thousand pounds, against the Pennsylvanian Anthracite Coal Corporation, Limited. The sum he might raise on the policies of insurance would about cover these bills; and, simultaneously with their withdrawal, fresh bills might be floated, and the horse-leech cry of the brokers for contango might be satisfied until there came a reaction in the City, and the turning tide should float him into some harbour of safety. Beyond this harbour shone a splendid beacon, the dead girl's inheritance—his, to claim by right of the same will that would give him the sum insured upon her life.

Without this immediate ready money there was no extrcation from the hideous labyrinth. His position had been already too long sustained by bills of exchange. There were people in the City who wanted, in vulgar parlance, to see the colour of his money. He knew this—and knew how frail the tenure by which he held his position, and how dire the crash which would hurl him down to ruin.

After the proclamation of his inability to meet his differences—the Deluge: and, looking gloomily athwart the flood and tempest, he saw neither ark nor Ararat.

Charlotte's death was the one chance of redemption; and to that event he looked as to a figure in a mathematical proposition. Of this girl herself, with all her wealth of beauty and goodness, of hope and love, he had scarcely any definite idea. She had so long been no more to him than an important figure in the mathematics of his life, that he had lost the power to behold her in any other light.

The hardness of his nature was something lower than absolute cruelty of heart. It was less human than the half-insane ferocity of a Nero. It was a calm indifference to the waste of human life, which, displayed upon a larger field of operation, would have made a monster cold and passionless as Sphinx or Chimæra.

"I must see Ann Woolper," he said to himself, presently, "she will not dare to exclude me from that room."

He listened to the striking of the Bayswater clocks. Two o'clock. Within and without the house reigned a profound silence. The room immediately over Mr. Sheldon's study was Charlotte's room, and here there had been for a long time no sound of life or movement.

"Asleep, I dare say," muttered Mr. Sheldon, "invalid and nurse both."

He exchanged his boots for slippers, which he kept in a little cupboard below the bookshelves, among old newspapers, and went softly from the room. The gas was burning dimly on

the stairs and on the landing above. He opened the door of the invalid's room softly, and went in.

Mrs. Woolper was seated beside the bed. She looked up at him with unwinking eyes.

"I thought you was abed, sir," she said.

"No; I am too anxious to sleep."

"I think every one is anxious, sir," Mrs. Woolper answered, gravely.

"How is your patient?"

The pretty white curtains of the little brass Arabian bedstead were drawn.

"She is asleep, sir. She sleeps a great deal. The doctor said that was only natural."

"She has taken her medicine, I suppose?" said Mr. Sheldon.

He glanced round the room as he asked this question, but could see no trace of medicine-bottle or glass.

"Yes, sir; she has taken it twice, the poor dear."

"Let me look at the medicine."

"The strange doctor said as I was to let no one touch it, sir."

"Very likely; but that direction doesn't apply to me."

"He said no one, sir."

"You are an old fool!" muttered Mr. Sheldon, savagely.

"Ah no, sir," the housekeeper answered, with a profound sigh; "I am wiser than I was when poor Mr. Halliday died."

This answer, and the sigh, and the look of solemn sadness which accompanied it, told him that this woman knew all. She had suspected him long ago; but against her unsupported suspicion the mere force of his character had prevailed. She was wiser now; for on this occasion suspicion was confirmed by the voice of science.

He stood for a few minutes looking at his old nurse, with a dark moody face. What could he feel except supreme indignation against this woman, who dared to oppose him when he had the best right to rely on her faithful service? She had promised him her fidelity, and at the first hint from a stranger she coolly deserted him and went over to the enemy.

"Do you mean to say that you refuse to let me look at the medicine which you have been giving to my stepdaughter?" he asked.

"I mean to say that I will obey the orders given me by the strange doctor," the old woman answered, with a calm sadness of tone, "even if it turns you against me—you that have given me a comfortable home when there was nothing before me but the workhouse; you that I carried in my arms forty years ago. If it was anything less than her dear life that was in danger, sir, and if I hadn't stood by her father's deathbed, I couldn't stand

against you like this. But knowing what I do, I will stand firm as a rock between you and her; and think myself all the more truly your faithful servant because I do not fear to offend you."

"That's so much arrant humbug, Mrs. Woolper. I suppose you've made your book with Miss Halliday and Miss Halliday's lover, and think you can serve your turn best by sticking to them and throwing me over the bridge. It's only the way of the world. You're genuine Yorkshire, and know how to pack your cards for winning the trick. But suppose I were to spoil your game by turning you out of doors neck and crop? What then?"

"I don't think you'll do that, sir."

"Why not, pray?"

"I don't think you dare do it, in the face of that strange doctor."

"You don't? And so Dr. Jedd is the master of this house, is he?"

"Yes, sir. Till that poor dear young lady is well again, if ever that day comes, I think Dr. Jedd will be the real master in this house."

"By ——! Mrs. Woolper, you're a cool hand, I must say!"

He could say no more. Of passionate or declamatory language he had no command. The symbols of thought that obtained in his world were of a limited and primitive range.

"You're a cool hand," he repeated, under his breath. And then he turned and left the room, opening and closing the door less cautiously than on his entrance.

The door of the opposite room was opened softly as he came out into the corridor, and Diana Paget stood before him, dressed as she had been in the day.

"What!" he exclaimed, impatiently, "are you up too?"

"Yes, Mr. Sheldon. I cannot sleep while Lotta is so ill."

"Humph! I suppose you mean to get yourself on the sick-list, and give us another invalid to nurse."

"I will not trouble you to nurse me if I should be ill."

"Ah!" growled the stockbroker, as he went to his own room, "you are a pack of silly women altogether; and your fine friend Hawkehurst is more womanish than the silliest of you. Good night."

He went into his own room, where he found his wife still awake. Her weak lamentings and bewailings were insupportable to him; and at three o'clock he went downstairs, put on his boots and a light overcoat, and went out into the dim regions of Bayswater, whence he saw the sun rise red above the eastern roofs and chimneys, and where he walked until the first clatter

of hoofs and roll of wheels began to echo through the empty streets, and, with faint distant cries of sweeps and milk-women, life's chorus recommenced.

It was seven o'clock when he went back to his house, and let himself in softly with his latchkey. He knew that he had been walking a long time, and that he had seen the sun rise; but what streets or squares he had been walking in he did not know. He crept upstairs to his dressing-room with stealthy footsteps, and made an elaborate toilet. At eight o'clock he was seated at breakfast in the hastily-arranged dining-room, with the newspapers by the side of his cup and saucer. At nine he went into the hall to receive Dr. Jedd and Dr. Doddleson, who arrived almost simultaneously. His carefully-arranged hair and whiskers, his well made unpretentious clothes, his spotless linen, would have done credit to an archbishop. Of all the cares and calculations of his long dreary night there was no trace, except a certain dulness in his eyes, and the dark half-circles below them.

CHAPTER IV.

COUNTING THE COST.

For four days and four nights there were fear and watching in Mr. Sheldon's house; and in all that time the master never quitted it, except stealthily, in the dead of the night, or at early daybreak, to roam in a purposeless manner he knew not where. The doctors came and went—Dr. Doddleson once a day, Dr. Jedd two or three times a day—and every one in villas adjoining and villas opposite, and even in villas round the corner, knew that the stockbroker's stepdaughter lay sick unto death; for the white horses of Dr. Jedd's landau were as the pale horse of the Pale Rider himself, and where they came was danger or death. Ah, thank God! to some they have brought hope and blessing; not always the dread answer, "You have called me in vain."

Valentine Hawkehurst came many times in the day, but between him and Mr. Sheldon there could be no safe meeting; and the lover came quietly to the little gate, where a kindly housemaid gave him a little note from Diana Paget. Miss Paget wrote half a dozen little notes of this kind in the course of every day, but she never left her post in the room opposite the sick-chamber. She complained of headache, or of some vague illness which prevented her taking her meals in the dining-

room, and Mr. Sheldon was fain to be satisfied with this explanation of her conduct.

She was on guard; and the wretched master of the house knew that she was on guard, and that if Ann Woolper could be bought over, or frightened into compliance with his wishes, this girl would still remain, faithful as watchdog, by the door of her friend and companion. He asked himself whether by violent or diplomatic process, he could rid himself of this second watcher; and the answer was in the negative. The circle around him was a circle not to be broken.

His wife, as yet, had been told nothing of the suspicions that reigned in the breasts of other people. He knew this; for in his wife's face there was no token of that dark knowledge, and she, of all people, would be least skilled to deceive his scrutinizing eyes. Nor had the younger servants of his household any share in the hideous suspicion. He had watched the countenance of the maid who waited on him, and had convinced himself of this.

It was something to know that even these were not yet leagued against him; but he could not tell at what moment they too might be sworn into that secret society which was growing up against him in his own house. Power to carry out his own schemes in the face of these people he felt that he had none. Upon the dark road which he had travelled until of late without let or hindrance, there had arisen, all at once, an insurmountable barrier, with the fatal inscription, Here there is no Thoroughfare.

Beyond this barrier he could not pass. Sudden as the dread arrest of Lot's wife was the mandate which had checked his progress. He was brought to a dead stop; and there was nothing for him to do but to wait the issue of Fate. He stood, defiant, unabashed, face to face with the figure of Nemesis, and calmly awaited the lifting of the veil.

He hoped that Charlotte Halliday would die. If by her death he could tide over his difficulties and drift into smooth water, it would be but a very small thing to him that Dr. Jedd, and Dr. Doddleson enlightened by his colleague, and Valentine Hawkehurst, and Diana Paget, and a stupid pig-headed old Yorkshirewoman, should carry in their minds for the remainder of their lives the suspicion that by his means that fair young life had been brought to its early close.

What would it amount to in the future of his own existence? Prudential considerations would induce these people to lock the secret of this suspicion in their own breasts. Dr. Jedd would bow to him somewhat coldly, perhaps, if they met in the streets of London, or possibly might refuse to make any return to his

passing salutation; but the cut direct from Dr. Jedd would not cast a shadow over his commercial career, or even weaken his social position. If, by the loud folly of Hawkehurst, some evil rumour about him should float as far eastward as the Stock Exchange, who would be found to give credence to the dark report? Men would shrug their shoulders and shake their heads incredulously; and one of these wise men of the east would remark that, "A fellow in Sheldon's position doesn't do that kind of thing, you know;" while another would say, "I dined with him at Greenwich last summer, and a remarkably good dinner he gave us. Dawkins, the great shipbuilder, and M'Pherson, of M'Pherson and Flinders, the Glasgow merchants, were there. Very jolly affair, I assure you. Deuced gentlemanly fellow, Phil Sheldon." And so the matter would end.

Would there be an inquest in the event of his stepdaughter's death? Well, no. Jedd knew that in such a case all *post-mortem* inquiry must end in confusion and perplexity, statement and counter-statement from medical witnesses, who would contradict one another persistently in the support of their pet theories, and who would regard the investigation as a very convenient opportunity for ventilating their own opinions and airing their own importance. A considerable number of the canine race would be slaughtered, perhaps, in the process of dilettante experiments; the broad principles of chemical science would be discussed from every point of view, in innumerable letters published in the *Zeus* and the *Diurnal Hermes;* and the fact that an amiable and innocent young woman had been foully murdered would be swept out of the minds of mankind before a whirlwind of technical debate. Jedd was the last man to stake his reputation upon such a hazard. No: Mr. Sheldon knew that he had played a cautious game; and if he should ultimately lose the stake for which he had ventured, it would be because he had been just a little too cautious.

"These things are generally done too quickly," he said to himself. "My mistake has been to make matters too slow."

Come what might, of after-consequences to himself from Charlotte Halliday's illness or death he had no apprehension.

Thus it was that he met Dr. Jedd day after day with a face as calm as the stony countenance of that distinguished physician himself. Such anxiety as an affectionate stepfather should feel during the peril of his stepdaughter Mr. Sheldon took care to express. Greater anxiety than this by no look or gesture did he betray. He knew that he was watched; and that the people about him were inimical to himself and to his interests; and he was never off his guard.

It had been necessary for him to come to London in order to be within easy reach of that troubled sea, the money-market. But perilous though the voyage of his bark across that tempestuous ocean was, he could not guide the helm in person. He was obliged to confide matters to the care of Mr. Frederick Orcott, whom he harassed with telegraphic despatches at all hours of the day, and who at this period seemed to spend his life between the stockbroker's office and Bayswater.

It seemed as if Mr. Sheldon meant to hold his ground in that house until the issue of events was determined. Valentine Hawkehurst and George Sheldon met at the solicitor's offices, and there was a long and serious consultation between them.

"One thing seems pretty clear," said George, conclusively, "and that is, that my brother Phil isn't to be got off the premises except by some very deep move. The question is, what move can be deep enough to trap such a man as he? He's a man who knows the inside of your mind better than you do yourself; and can reckon you up as easily as the simplest sum in arithmetic."

The two men talked together very seriously for some time after this, and on the same day Valentine lay in wait for Dr. Jedd as he left Philip Sheldon's house, and was driven back to town in that gentleman's carriage. On the road there was much serious talk between Miss Halliday's physician and Miss Halliday's lover. Valentine was still very grave and very anxious when he took his leave of Dr. Jedd; but he was more hopeful than he had been for the last few days.

On the same evening Gustave Lenoble received a brief epistle from his plighted wife.

"My dear Gustave,—I regret to find from your letter that the doctors consider my father weaker than when I was last at Knightsbridge; but, even knowing this, I cannot come to him just yet. The duty which detains me here is even more sacred than his claim upon my care. And I know your goodness to him, and feel that in you he has a better friend and comforter than I could be to him. I thank you, dear, for your kindness to this poor broken-down wanderer even more than for your generous devotion to me. And now I am going to ask you a favour. It is, that you will afford Mr. Hawkehurst, the person who will give you this letter, the help of your friendship and counsel in very difficult and critical circumstances, which he will explain to you. I have spoken to you of him very little, though his devotion to my dear adopted sister, Charlotte Halli-

day, brings him very near to me. Her long, and of late dangerous, illness has been a bitter time of trial to him, even more than to me; but the trial has proved him true as steel. I think your counsel may be of some service to him just now, and I am sure your friendship will help to support him in a period of acute anxiety.

"Do not ask to see me, dear Gustave. I *cannot* leave this house while Charlotte is in danger; but if it please God to remove that danger, I shall then be free to go where I please, and my future life shall be at your disposal. Do not think me cold or ungrateful; I am only faithful to the first friend I ever knew.—Yours always, with all affection,

"DIANA PAGET."

CHAPTER V.

THE BEGINNING OF THE END.

THREE days elapsed after the delivery of this letter. Upwards of a week had gone by since the return of Mr. Sheldon and his family from Harold's Hill: and as yet Philip Sheldon knew not what the issue of events was to be. Very vague were the oracular sentences which his questioning extorted from Dr. Jedd, and he had tried in vain to obtain a *tête-à-tête* interview with Dr. Doddleson. The physician of Burlington Row took care that his feeble colleague should not fall alone and defenceless into the pathway of Philip Sheldon. Of Charlotte's actual condition her stepfather, therefore, knew very little. He was told that her state was attended by danger; and the solemn faces which greeted him on every side implied that the danger was extreme. From her room he was in a manner excluded. If he went to her door to make some benevolent and paternal inquiry, he was met on the threshold by Ann Woolper, the sleepless and unresting. If he hinted a natural desire to see his invalid stepdaughter, he was told that she had that moment fallen asleep, or that she was too ill to see him. There was always some plausible reason why he should not be admitted to her room; and finding that this was so, he did not press the question.

He had taken Mrs. Woolper's measure, and had found that she was too strong for him; doubly strong since she was supported and sustained by that second sleepless watcher, Diana

Paget, whom Mr. Sheldon had long ago pronounced to be a strong-minded and superior young person.

From his wife he could obtain no real information—nothing but weepings and lamentations; weak apprehensions of future woe, weaker retrospective reflections on the fatal illness and untimely end of her first husband. Georgy was admitted once or twice a day to the sick-room; but she emerged therefrom no wiser than she entered it. Sorrow in the present, and the fear of greater sorrow to come, had utterly prostrated this poor weak soul. She believed what other people told her to believe, she hoped what they told her to hope. She was the very incarnation and express image of helpless misery.

So, in utter darkness of mind, Mr. Sheldon awaited his destiny. The day drew very near on which he must find certain sums of ready money, or must accept the dreary alternative of ruin and disgrace. He had the policies of assurance in his cash-box, together with the will which made him Charlotte's sole legatee; he had fixed in his own mind upon the man to whom he could apply for an advance of four thousand pounds on one of the two policies, and he relied on getting his banker to lend him money on the security of the second. But for the one needful event he had yet to wait. That event was Charlotte Halliday's death.

Of his dreary wanderings in the early morning the household knew nothing. The time which he chose for these purposeless rambles was just the time when no one was astir. The watchers in the two rooms above heard neither his going out nor his coming in, so stealthy were his movements on every occasion. But without this intermission from the dreadful concentration of his life, without this amount of physical exercise and fresh air, Philip Sheldon could scarcely have lived through this period. The solitude of shipwrecked mariner cast upon a desolate island could hardly be more lonely than this man's life had been since his return from Harold's Hill. From his study to the dining-room, and from the dining-room back to his study, was the only variety of his dreary days and nights. He had an iron bedstead put up in his study, and there he lay in the earlier hours of the night, taking such rest as he could from fitful dozing that was scarcely sleep, or from brief intervals of heavy slumber made horrible by torturing dreams.

In this room he could hear every sudden movement in the hall, every footstep on the stairs, every opening and shutting of the outer door. Here, too, he could keep his watch, holding himself ready to counter the movements of his enemies, should any opportunity arise for action on his part, defensive or aggressive.

To this room he stealthily returned one brilliant summer morning as the clocks were striking six. He had been walking in the Bayswater Road, amidst all the pleasant stir and bustle of early morning. Waggons coming in from the country, milkwomen setting forth on their daily rounds, clamorous young rooks cawing among the topmost branches of the elms, song-birds chirruping and gurgling their glad morning hymn; and over all things the glory and the freshness of the summer sunshine.

But to Philip Sheldon it was as if these things were not For the last twelve or fifteen years of his life he had taken no heed of the change of the seasons, except insomuch as the passage of time affected his bill-book, or the condition of that commercial world which was the beginning and end of his life Now, less than ever, had he an ear for the carolling of birds, or an eye for the glory of summer sunlight, or the flickering shadows of summer leaves faintly stirred by the soft summer wind.

He re-entered his house with a half-dazed sense of the stir and life that had been about him in the high road. It was a relief to him to escape this life and brightness, and to take shelter in the gloom of his study, where the shutters were closed, and only a faint glimmer of day crept through a chink in the shrunken woodwork.

For the first time since the beginning of this dreary period of idleness and suspense he felt himself thoroughly beaten, and instead of going up to his dressing-room for his careful morning toilet, as it was his habit to do at this hour, he flung himself, dressed as he was, upon the low iron bedstead, and fell into a heavy slumber.

Yes, there they were—the familiar tortures of his slumbers, the shadows of busy, eager faces; and upon all one universal expression of mingled anger and surprise. The sound of a wooden hammer striking three solemn strokes; the faint tones of Tom Halliday's voice, thanking him for his friendly care; the dying look in Tom Halliday's face, turned to him with such depth of trust and affection. And then across the shadowy realm of dreams there swept the slow solemn progress of a funeral *cortege*—plumed hearses, blacker than blackest night; innumerable horses, with funereal trappings and plumed headgear waving in an icy wind; long trains of shrouded figures stretching on into infinite space, in spectral procession that knew neither beginning nor end. And in all the solemn crowd passing perpetually with the same unceasing motion, there was no sound of human footfall, no tramp of horse's hoof, only that dismal waving of black plumage in an icy wind, and the deep boom of a bell tolling for the dead.

He awoke with a start, and exclaimed, "If this is what it is to sleep, I will never sleep again!"

In the next minute he recovered himself. He had been lying on his back. The endless pageant, the dreadful tolling of the funeral bell, meant no more than nightmare, the common torment of all humanity.

"What a fool I must be!" he muttered to himself, as he wiped his forehead, which had grown cold and damp in the agony of his dream.

He opened the shutters, and then looked at the clock on the mantelpiece. To his surprise he found that he had been sleeping three hours. It was nine o'clock. He went upstairs to dress. There was an unusual stir in the corridor above. Ann Woolper was standing there, with her hand on the door of the sick-room, talking to Diana, who covered her face suddenly as he approached, and disappeared into her own room.

The beating of his heart quickened suddenly. Something had happened to disturb the common course of events. Something? What was likely to happen, except the one dread circumstance for which he hoped and waited with such horrible eagerness?

In Ann Woolper's solemn face he read an answer to his thought. For the first time he was well nigh losing his self-possession. It was with an effort that he steadied himself sufficiently to ask the usual conventional question in the usual conventional tone.

"Is she any better this morning, Ann?"

"Yes, sir, she is much better," the Yorkshirewoman answered solemnly. "She is where none can harm her now."

Yes; it was the usual periphrase of these vulgar people. He knew all their cant by heart.

"You mean to say—she—is dead?"

He no longer tried to conceal his agitation. It was a part of his duty to be agitated by the news of his stepdaughter's untimely death.

"O, sir, you may well be sorry," said the Yorkshirewoman, with deep feeling. "She was the sweetest, most forgiving creature that ever came into this world; and to the last no hard or cruel word ever passed her innocent lips. Yes, sir, she is gone; she is beyond the power of any one to harm her."

"All that sort of stuff is so much hypocritical twaddle, Mrs. Woolper," muttered Mr. Sheldon impatiently; "and I recommend you to keep it for the chaplain of the workhouse in which you are likely to end your days. At what time—did—did this sad event—happen?"

"About an hour ago."

In the very hour when, in his hideous dream, he had beheld the solemn funeral train winding on for ever through the dim realms of sleep. Was there some meaning in such foolish shadows, after all?

"And why was I not sent for?"

"You were asleep, sir. I came downstairs myself, and looked into your room. You were fast asleep, and I wouldn't disturb you."

"That was very wrong; but it was of a piece with the rest of your conduct, which has been from first to last antagonistic to me. I suppose I can see my stepdaughter now," Mr. Sheldon added, with a grim smile. "There is no further excuse—about headache—or sleep."

"No, sir, you cannot see her yet. In an hour, if you wish to come into this room, you can come."

"You are extremely obliging. I begin to doubt whether I am really in my own house. In an hour, then, I will come. Where is my wife?"

"In her own room, sir, lying down; asleep, I believe."

"I will not disturb her. How about the registration, by the bye? That must be seen to."

"Dr. Jedd has promised to attend to that, sir."

"Has Dr. Jedd been here?"

"He was here an hour ago."

"Very good. And he will see to that," muttered Mr. Sheldon thoughtfully.

The event for which he had been so long waiting seemed at the last a little sudden. It had shaken his nerves more than he had supposed it possible that they could be shaken.

He went to his dressing-room, and on this occasion made a very hasty toilet. The event had been tardy, and he had no time to lose in discounting it now that it had come to pass. He went from his dressing-room back to his study, took the packet containing the policies of assurance and the will from the deed-box, and left the house.

CHAPTER VI.

CONFUSION WORSE CONFOUNDED.

A CAB conveyed Mr. Sheldon swiftly to a dingy street in the City—a street which might have been called the pavement of wasted footsteps, so many an impecunious wretch tramped to and fro upon those dreary flags in vain.

The person whom Mr. Sheldon came to see was a distinguished bill-discounter, who had served him well in more than one crisis, and on whose service he fancied he could now rely.

Mr. Kaye, the bill-discounter, was delighted to see his worthy friend Mr. Sheldon. He had just come up from his family at Brighton, and had quite a little court awaiting him in an outer chamber, through which Mr. Sheldon had been ushered to the inner office.

"It's rather early for such a visitor as you," Mr. Kaye said, after a few commonplaces. "I have not been in town half an hour."

"My business is too important for any consideration about hours," answered Mr. Sheldon, "or I should not be here at all. I have just come from the deathbed of my wife's daughter."

"Indeed!" exclaimed the bill-discounter, looking inexpressibly shocked. Until that moment he had lived in supreme ignorance of the fact that Mr. Sheldon had a stepdaughter; but his sorrow-stricken expression of countenance might have implied that he had known and esteemed the young lady.

"Yes, it's very sad," said Mr. Sheldon; "and something more than sad for me. The poor girl had great expectations, and would have come into a very fine fortune if she had lived a year or two longer."

"Ha! dear me, how very unfortunate! Poor young lady!"

"Jedd and Doddleson—you know them by repute, of course—have been attending her for the last six weeks. There will be no end of expense for me; and it has been all of no use."

"Consumption, I suppose?"

"Well, no; not pulmonary disease. A kind of atrophy. I scarcely know what to call it. Now, look here, Kaye. This illness has thrown all my affairs into a muddle. Taken in conjunction with the depressed state of the money-market, it has been altogether an upset for me. I have been staying at home looking after this poor girl and my wife—who of course is dreadfully cut up, and that sort of thing—when I ought to have been

in the City. Luckily for me, and for my wife, in whose interests I acted, I took the precaution to get her daughter's life insured eight or nine months ago; in point of fact, immediately after finding she was heir-at-law to a considerable fortune. The policy is for five thousand pounds. I want you to give me four thousand immediately upon the strength of the document and of my stepdaughter's will."

"Give you four thousand!" exclaimed Mr. Kaye, with a little unctuous laugh. "Do you suppose I keep such a balance as that at my banker's?"

"I suppose that you can give me the money if you like."

"I might be able to get it for you."

"Yes; that's a kind of humbug a hundred years old. We've heard all about little Premium and his friend in the City, and so on, from that man who wrote plays and cut a figure in Parliament. You can give me the money on the spot if you like, Kaye; and if I didn't want ready money very badly I shouldn't come to you. The insurance company will give me five thousand in a month or two. I can give you my bill at two months' date, and deposit the policy in your hands as collateral security. I might get this money from other quarters — from my bankers', for instance; but I don't want to let them know too much."

Mr. Kaye deliberated. He had assisted Mr. Sheldon's financial operations, and had profited thereby. Money advanced upon such a security must be as safe as money invested in Consols, unless there were anything doubtful in the circumstances of the policy; and that, with a man of Mr. Sheldon's respectability, was to the last degree unlikely.

"When do you want this money?" he asked at last.

"At the beginning of next week. On the twenty-fifth at latest."

"And this is the twentieth. Sharp work."

"Not at all. You could give me the money this afternoon, if you pleased."

"Well, I'll think it over. It's a matter in which I feel myself bound to take my solicitor's opinion. Suppose you meet him here to-morrow at twelve o'clock? You can bring the necessary evidence to support the claim—the doctor's and registrar's certificate, and so on?"

"Yes," Mr. Sheldon answered, thoughtfully; "I will bring the documentary evidence. To-morrow at twelve, then."

Very little more was said. Mr. Sheldon left the will and the policy in the bill-discounter's possession, and departed. Things had gone as smoothly as he could fairly expect them to go. From Mr. Kaye's office he went to the Unitas Bank, where he

had a very friendly, but not altogether satisfactory, interview with the secretary. He wanted the Unitas people to advance him money on the strength of the second policy of assurance; but his balance had been very low of late, and the secretary could not promise compliance with his desires. Those Unitas shares valued at five thousand pounds, which he had transferred to his beloved stepdaughter, had been retransferred by the young lady some months before, with a view to the more profitable investment of the money.

This money, as well as all else that Philip Sheldon could command, had gone to the same bottomless pit of unlucky speculation. From the bank the stockbroker went to his office, where he saw Frederick Orcott, to whom he announced his stepdaughter's death with all due appearance of sorrow. He sat for an hour in his office, arranging his affairs for the following day, then sent for another cab, and drove back to Bayswater. The noonday press and noise of the City seemed strange to him, almost as they might have seemed to a man newly returned from lonely wanderings in distant wildernesses.

The blinds were down at the Lawn. His own handsome bedchamber and adjoining dressing-room faced the road, and it was at the windows of these two rooms he looked. He fancied his weak foolish wife wailing and lamenting behind those lowered blinds.

"And I shall have to endure her lamentations," he thought, with a shudder. "I shall have no further excuse for avoiding her. But, on the other hand, I shall have the pleasure of giving Mrs. Woolper and Miss Paget notice to quit."

He derived a grim satisfaction from this thought. Yes; insolence from those two women he would endure no longer. The time had come in which he would assert his right to be master in his own house. The game had been played against him boldly by Jedd and these people, and had been lost by them. He was the winner. He could not dismiss doctors, nurse, friend, lover. Charlotte Halliday's death made him master of the situation.

He went into his house with the determination to assert his authority at once. Within all was very quiet. He looked into the dining-room—it was quite empty; into the study—also empty. He went slowly upstairs, composing his face into the appropriate expression. At the door of that chamber which to him should have seemed of all earthly chambers the most awful, he knocked softly.

There was no answer.

He knocked a little louder, but there was still no answer. A little louder again, and with the same result.

"Is there no one there?" he asked himself. "No one, except——?"

He opened the door, and went in, with unshaken nerves, to look upon that one quiet sleeper whom his summons could not awaken, whom his presence could not disturb.

There was no nurse or watcher by the bed. Everything was arranged with extreme neatness and precision; but it seemed to him that there were objects missing in the room, objects that had been familiar to him during the dead girl's illness, and which were associated with her presence,—the clock that had stood on the table by her bed, a stand of books, a low easy-chair, with embroidered cover worked by her mother and Diana Paget. The room looked blank and empty without these things, and Mr. Sheldon wondered what officious hand had removed them.

Yonder stood the pretty little bedstead, shrouded by closely drawn white curtains. Philip Sheldon walked slowly across the room, and drew aside one of the curtains. He had looked upon the death-sleep of Charlotte Halliday's father, why not upon hers?

She was not there! Those closely drawn curtains shrouded only the bed on which she had slept in the tranquil slumbers of her careless girlhood. That cold lifeless form, whose rigid outline Philip Sheldon had steeled himself to see, had no place here.

He put his hand to his head, bewildered. "What does it mean?" he asked himself; "surely she died in this room!"

He went hurriedly to his wife's room. They had taken Charlotte there, perhaps, shortly before her death. Some feverish fancy might have possessed her with the desire to be taken thither.

He opened the door and went in; but here again all was blank and empty. The room was arranged after its usual fashion; but of his wife's presence there was no token. His sense of mystification and bewilderment grew suddenly into a sense of fear. What did it mean? What hellish fooling had he been the dupe of?

He went to Diana's room. That, too, was empty. A trunk and a portmanteau, covered and strapped as if for removal, occupied the centre of the room.

There was no other room upon this floor. Above this floor there were only the rooms of the servants.

He went downstairs to the dining-room and rang the bell. The parlour-maid came in answer to his summons.

"Where is your mistress?" he asked.

"Gone out, sir; she went at eight o'clock this morning. And

O, if you please, sir, Dr. Jedd called, and said I was to give you this—with the certificate."

The certificate! Yes, the certificate of Charlotte Halliday's death,—the certificate which he must produce to-morrow, with other evidence, for the satisfaction of the bill-discounter and his legal adviser. He stared at the girl, still possessed by the sense of bewilderment which had come upon him on seeing those empty rooms upstairs. He took the letter from her almost mechanically, and tore it open without looking at the address. The certificate dropped to the ground. He picked it up with a tremulous hand, and for some moments stood staring at it with dazzled, unseeing eyes. He could see that it was a document with dates and names written in a clerkly hand. For some moments he could see no more. And then words and names shone out of the confusion of letters that spun and whirled, like motes in the sunshine, before his dazzled eyes.

"Valentine Hawkehurst, bachelor, author, Carlyle Terrace, Edgware Road, son of Arthur Hawkehurst, journalist; Charlotte Halliday, spinster, of the Lawn, Bayswater, daughter of Thomas Halliday, farmer."

He read no more.

It was a copy of a certificate of marriage—not a certificate of death—that had been brought to him.

"You can go," he said to the servant hoarsely.

He had a vague consciousness that she was staring at him with curious looks, and that it was not good for him to be watched by any one just now.

"About dinner, sir, if you please?" the young woman began timidly.

"What do I know about dinner?"

"You will dine at home, sir?"

"Dine at home? Yes; Mrs. Woolper can give you your orders."

"Mrs. Woolper has gone out, sir. She has gone for good, I believe, sir; she took her boxes. And Miss Paget's luggage will be sent for, if you please, sir. There's a letter, sir, that Mrs. Woolper left for you on the mantelpiece."

"She was very good. That will do; you can go."

The girl departed, bewildered like her fellow-servants by the strangeness of the day's proceedings, still more bewildered by the strangeness of her master's manner.

CHAPTER VII.

"THERE IS A WORD WILL PRIAM TURN TO STONE."

When the servant was gone, Mr. Sheldon sat down and examined the document she had given him.

Yes, it was in due form. A certified copy of the certificate of a marriage performed that morning at the church of St. Matthias-in-the-fields, Paddington, and duly witnessed by the registrar of that parish. If this document were indeed genuine, as to all appearance it was, Valentine Hawkehurst and Charlotte Halliday had been married that morning; and the will and the policy of assurance deposited with Mr. Kaye the bill-discounter were so much waste-paper.

And they had fooled him, Philip Sheldon, as easily as this! The furious rage which he felt against all these people, and, more than against them, against his own besotted folly for allowing himself to be so fooled, was a sharper agony than had ever yet rent his cruel heart. He had been a scoundrel all his life, and had felt some of the pains and penalties of his position; but to be a defeated scoundrel was a new sensation to him; and a savage impotent hate and anger against himself and the universe took possession of his mind.

He walked up and down the room for some time, abandoned wholly to the ungovernable rage that consumed him, and with no thought beyond that blind useless fury. And then there came upon him the feeling that was almost a part of his mind—the consciousness that something must be done, and promptly. Whatever his position was, he must face it. His hurried pacing to and fro came to a sudden stop, and he took the crumpled document from his pocket, and examined it once more.

There seemed little doubt that it was genuine; and a visit to the church where the marriage was stated to have been performed would immediately place the matter beyond all doubt. With the copy of the certificate, he had taken from his pocket the letter that had enclosed it. He saw now that the envelope was addressed in Hawkehurst's hand.

"Favoured by Dr. Jedd," he had written in a corner of the envelope.

Why should Dr. Jedd "favour" Mr. Hawkehurst's letter? Why, indeed, unless there had been a conspiracy concocted by these men against his authority and his interests?

Valentine's letter was brief and business-like.

"Sir,—With the full approbation of her mother and only near relation, my dear Charlotte has this day become my wife. The enclosed attested copy of the certificate of our marriage will afford you all particulars. I shall refrain from entering upon any explanation of my conduct; and I believe such explanation to be wholly unnecessary. You can scarcely fail to understand why I have acted in this manner, and why I congratulate myself and my dear wife on her departure from your house as on an escape from imminent peril. It will be, I fear, little satisfaction to you to hear that the doctors have pronounced your stepdaughter to be out of danger, though still in very weak health. She is now comfortably established in a temporary home, with her mother and Diana Paget; and in all probability some months must elapse before she and I can begin our new life together. To afford my darling girl the legal protection of marriage was the object of this sudden and secret union. You, of all men, will most fully comprehend how necessary such protection had become to ensure her safety.

"Should you, however, require further enlightenment as to the motives that prompted this step, Dr. Jedd will be the fittest person to give you such information; and has expressed his willingness to answer any questions you may please to put to him.

"For the rest, I beg to assure you that the rights of Mrs. Hawkehurst in relation to the inheritance of the late John Haygarth's wealth will be as carefully protected as those of Miss Halliday; nor will the hasty marriage of this morning hinder the execution of any deed of settlement calculated to guard her interests in the future.

"With this assurance, I remain, sir,

"Your obedient servant,

"Valentine Hawkehurst.

"Carlyle Terrace, Edgware Road."

Enclosed with this there was a second letter — from his wife.

He read it with a countenance that expressed mingled anger and contempt.

"Fool!" he muttered; "this is about the only service she could do me."

The letter was long and incoherent; blotted with tears—in places completely illegible. Mr. Sheldon cared only to master the main facts contained in it, which were these:—

His wife had left him for ever. Dr. Jedd and Valentine Hawkehurst had told her of something—something that affected

the safety of her darling and only child—and the knowledge of which must separate her for ever from him. Of the money which she had brought to him she claimed nothing. Even her jewels, which were in his keeping, in the iron safe where he kept his papers, she did not attempt to obtain from him. Valentine would not allow her to starve. The humblest shelter, the poorest food, would suffice her in the future; but no home of his providing could she ever inhabit again.

"What I have suffered in this last few days is only known to myself and to heaven," she wrote. "O Philip, how could you—how could you even shape the thought of such a deed as this, which you have been doing, day after day, for the last two months? I could not have believed what they have told me, if I had not seen my child fade hour by hour under your care, slowly, surely—and recover as surely directly you were excluded from any part in our care of her. If it were possible not to believe these people, I would disbelieve them, and would cling to you faithfully still; but the voices against you are too many, the proofs against you are too strong.

"Do not seek to see me. I am with my poor child, who was but just able to bear the removal from your house, and to go through the ceremony that was performed this morning. Little did I ever think my daughter would have such a wedding. What a mockery all my plans seem now!—and I had chosen the six bridesmaids, and arranged all the dresses in my own mind. To see my dear girl dressed anyhow, in her oldest bonnet, standing before the altar huddled up in a shawl, and given away by a strange doctor, who kept looking at his watch in a most disrespectful manner during the ceremony, was very bitter to me."

Mr. Sheldon flung aside the letter with an oath. He had no time to waste upon such twaddle as this. He tore open Nancy Woolper's letter. It was a poor honest scrawl, telling him how faithfully she had served him, how truly she had loved him in the past, and how she could henceforth serve him no more. It exhorted him, in humble ill-spelt phrases, to repentance. It might not yet be too late even for such a sinner as he had been.

He tore these two epistles into infinitesimal fragments, and flung them into the fireplace. Valentine Hawkehurst's letter he kept. It was a document of some legal importance.

For a moment there had flashed across his brain the thought that he might punish these people for their interference with his affairs. He might bring an action against Dr. Jedd for slander, and compel the physician to prove the charges insinuated against him, or pay the penalty attendant upon an unjustifiable accusa-

tion. He was well assured that Dr. Jedd could prove very little, and a jury, if properly worked, might award him exemplary damages.

But on the other hand, the circumstantial evidence against him was very strong; and evidence which might be insufficient to prove him guilty in a trial for his life might be a sufficient defence for his enemies against an action for slander; if, indeed, the course which Dr. Jedd and Valentine Hawkehurst had taken did in itself constitute a slanderous and malicious imputation. Nor could any such action invalidate the marriage solemnized that morning; and that one fact comprised his utter ruin. Charlotte's interests were merged in the interests of her husband. No shadow of claim upon John Haygarth's wealth remained to him.

His ruin was complete and dire. For a long time his circumstances had been desperate—no avenue of escape open to him but the one dark way which he had trodden; and now that last road was closed against him. The day was very near at hand when his fictitious bills on shadowy companies must be dishonoured; and with the dishonour of those bills came the end of all things for him,—a complete revelation of all those dishonest artifices by which he had kept his piratical bark afloat on the commercial waters.

He surveyed his position in every light, calmly and deliberately, and saw there was no hope. The whole scheme of his existence was reduced to the question of how much ready-money he could carry out of that house in his pocket, and in what direction he should betake himself after leaving it.

His first care must be to ascertain whether the marriage described in the duplicate certificate had really taken place; his next to repossess himself of the papers left with Mr. Kaye.

Before leaving the house he went to his study, where he examined his banker's book. Yes, it was as they had told him at the bank. He was overdrawn. Among the letters lying unopened on his writing-table he found a letter from one of the officials of the Unitas, calling his attention, politely and respectfully, to that oversight upon his part. He read the letter, and crumpled it into his pocket with an angry gesture.

"I am just about as well off now as I was twelve years ago, before Tom Halliday came to Fitzgeorge Street," he said to himself; "and I have the advantage of being twelve years older."

Yes, this is what it all came to, after all. He had been travelling in a circle. The discovery was humiliating. Mr. Sheldon began to think that his line of life had not been a paying one.

He opened his iron safe, and forced the lock of the jewel-case in which his wife had kept the few handsome ornaments that he had given her in the early days of their marriage, as a reward for being good—that is to say, for allowing her second husband to dispose of her first husband's patrimony without let or hindrance. The jewels were only a few rings, a brooch, a pair of earrings, and a bracelet; but they were good of their kind, and in all worth something like two hundred pounds.

These, and the gold chronometer which he carried in his waistcoat-pocket, constituted all the worldly wealth which Mr. Sheldon could command, now that the volcanic ground upon which his commercial position had been built began to crumble beneath his feet, and the bubbling of the crater warned him of his peril. He put the trinkets into his pocket without compunction, and then went upstairs to his dressing-room, where he proceeded to pack his clothes in a capacious portmanteau, which in itself might constitute his credentials among strangers. so eminently respectable was its appearance.

In this dread crisis of his life he thought of everything that affected his own interests. To what was he going? That question was for the moment unanswerable. In every quarter of the globe there are happy hunting-grounds for the soldier of fortune. Some plan for the future would shape itself in his mind by-and-by. His wife's desertion had left him thoroughly independent. He had no tie to restrain his movements, nothing to dread except such proceedings as might be taken against him by the holders of those bills. And such proceedings are slow, while modern locomotion is swift.

What was he leaving? That was easily answered. A labyrinth of debt and difficulty. The fine house, the handsome furniture, were held in the same bondage of the law as his household goods in Fitzgeorge Street had been. He had given a bill of sale upon everything he possessed six months before, to obtain ready-money. The final terrible resource had not been resorted to until all other means had been exhausted. Let this fact at least be recorded to his credit. He was like the lady whom the poet sings, who,

> "tolerably mild,
> To make a wash would *hardly* boil a child:"

that is to say, she would try all other materials for her cosmetic preparation first; and if they failed, would at last resort, unwillingly, to the boiling of children.

No; he had nothing to lose by flight—of that fact it was easy for him to assure himself.

He went downstairs, and rang for the servant.

"I am going out," he said, "to join my wife and her daughter, and return with them to the sea-side. There is a portmanteau upstairs in my room, ready packed. You will give it to the messenger I shall send in the course of the next day or two. At what time did Mrs. Sheldon and Miss Halliday leave this morning?"

"At eight o'clock, sir. Mr. Hawkehurst came to fetch them in a carriage. They went out by the kitchen passage and the side gate, sir, because you were asleep, Mrs. Woolper said, and was not to be disturbed."

"At eight. Yes. And Mrs. Woolper and Miss Paget?"

"They went a'most directly after you was gone out, sir. There was two cabs to take Miss Halliday's and Mrs. Sheldon's things, and such like,—just as there was when you came from Harold's Hill."

"Yes; I understand."

He was half inclined to ask the young woman if she had heard the direction given to the drivers of these two cabs. But he refrained from doing so. What could it profit him to know where his wife and stepdaughter were to be found? Whether they were in the next street or at the antipodes could matter very little to him, except so far as the knowledge of their place of habitation might guide him in his avoidance of them. Between him and them there was a gulf wider than all the waters of the world, and to consider them was only foolish waste of time and thought. He left the house, which for the last five years of his life had been the outward and visible sign of his social status, fully conscious that he left it for ever; and he left it without a sigh. For him the word home had no tender associations, and the domestic hearth had never inspired him with any sense of comfort or pleasure with which he might not have been inspired by the luxurious fireside of a first-class coffee-room. He was a man who would have chosen to spend his existence in joint-stock hotels, if there had not been solidity of position to be acquired from the possession of a handsome house.

He went to the Paddington church. It was only five o'clock in the afternoon by the clock of that edifice. The church was closely shut, but Mr. Sheldon found the clerk, who, in consideration of a handsome donation, took him to the vestry, and there showed him the register of marriages—the last entry therein.

Yes, there was Charlotte Halliday's signature, a little uncertain and tremulous.

"I suppose you are one of the young lady's relations, sir," said the clerk. "It was rather a strange affair; but the young lady's ma was with her; and the young lady was over age, so you see, there's nothing to be said against it."

Mr. Sheldon had nothing to say against the marriage. If any false statement of his, however base or cruel, could have invalidated the ceremonial, he would have spared no pains to devise such a falsehood. If he had been a citizen of the Southern States, he might have suborned witnesses to prove that there was black blood in the veins of Valentine Hawkehurst. If he had not been opposed to so strong an opponent as Dr. Jedd, he might have tried to get a commission of lunacy to declare Charlotte Halliday a madwoman, and thus invalidate her marriage. As it was, he knew that he could do nothing. He had failed. All was said in those three words.

He wasted no time at the church, but hurried on to the City, where he was just in time to catch Mr. Kaye leaving his office.

"Have you sent those papers to your solicitor?" he asked.

"No; I was just going to take them round to him. I have been thinking that it will be necessary to ascertain that there is no will of Miss Halliday's subsequent to this; and that will be rather difficult to find out. Women never know when to leave off making wills, if they once begin making them. They have a positive rage for multiplying documents, you know. If the testator in that great codicil case had been a woman, a jury would scarcely have refused to believe in the story of half a dozen different codicils hidden away in half a dozen different holes and corners. Women like that sort of thing. Of course, I quite understand that you bring me the will in all good faith; but I foresee difficulties in raising money upon such a security."

"You need give yourself no further trouble about the matter," said Mr. Sheldon cooly. "I find that I can do without the money, and I've come to reclaim the papers."

Mr. Kaye handed them to his client. He was not altogether pleased by this turn of affairs; for he had expected to profit considerably by Mr. Sheldon's necessities. That gentleman honoured him with no further explanations, but put the papers in his pocket, and wished the bill-discounter good day.

And this was the last time that Philip Sheldon was ever seen in his character of a solid and respectable citizen of London. He went from the bill-discounter's office to a pawnbroker in the City, with whom he pledged Georgy's trinkets and his own watch for the sum of a hundred and twenty pounds. From the pawnbroker's he went back to Bayswater for his portmanteau, and thence to the Euston Hotel, where he dined temperately in the coffee-room. After dinner he went out into the dull back streets that lurk behind Euston Square, and found an obscure little barber's shop, where he had his whiskers shaved off, and his hyacinthine locks cropped as close as the barber's big scissors could crop them.

The sacrifice of these hirsute adornments made an extraordinary change in this man. All the worst characteristics of his countenance came out with a new force; and the face of Mr. Sheldon, undisguised by the whiskers that had hidden the corners of his mouth, or the waving locks that had given height and breadth to his forehead, was a face that no one would be likely to trust.

From the Euston Station he departed by the night mail for Liverpool, under the cover of darkness. In that city he quietly awaited the departure of the Cunard steamer for New York, and was so fortunate as to leave England one day before that fatal date on which the first of his fictitious bills arrived at maturity.

Book the Tenth.

HARBOUR, AFTER MANY SHIPWRECKS.

CHAPTER I.

OUT OF THE DARK VALLEY.

Not with pomp or with splendour, with rejoicing or strewing of summer blossoms in the pathway of bride and bridegroom, had the marriage of Valentine and Charlotte been solemnized. Simple and secret had been the ceremonial, dark with clouds was the sky above them; and yet it is doubtful if happier bridegroom ever trod this earth than Valentine Hawkehurst as he went to his lonely lodging under the starry summer sky, after leaving his young wife to her mother's care in the new home that had been found for them.

He had reason to rejoice; for he had passed through the valley of the shadow of death. He had seen, very near, that dread presence before which the angels of faith and love can avail nothing. Fearless as Alcides had he gone down to the realms of darkness; triumphant and glad as the demigod he returned from the under-world, bearing his precious burden in his strong arms. The struggle had been dire, the agony of suspense a supreme torture; but from the awful contest the man came forth a better and a wiser man. Whatever strength of principle had been wanting to complete the work of reformation inaugurated by love, had been gained by Valentine Hawkehurst during the period of Charlotte's illness. His promised wife, his redeeming angel, she for whose affection he had first learned to render thanks to his God, had seemed to be slipping away from him. In the happiest hour of his prosperous courtship he had known himself unworthy of her, with no right, no claim, to so fair a prize, except the right of pure and unselfish love.

When the hour of trial came to him he had said, "Behold the avenger!" and in that hour it seemed to him that a lurking anticipation of future woe had been ever present with him in the midst of his happiness,—it seemed so natural, so reasonable

that this treasure should be taken away from him. What had he done, that he should go unpunished for all the errors and follies of his youth?

He looked back, and asked himself if he had been so vile a sinner as in these hours of self-reproach he was inclined to esteem himself? Could his life have been otherwise? Had he not been set in a groove, his young feet planted in the crooked ways, before he knew that life's journey might be travelled by a straighter road?

Alas, the answer given at the tribunal of conscience went against him! Other men had come into this world amidst surroundings as bad, nay, indeed, worse than the surroundings of his cradle. And of these men some had emerged from their native mire spotless and pure as from newly-fallen snow. The natural force of character which had saved these men had not been given to him. His feet had been set in the crooked ways, and he had travelled on, reckless, defiant, dimly conscious that the road was a bad one, and that his garments were bespattered with more mud-stains than would be agreeable to some travellers.

It was only when the all-powerful influence of love was brought to bear upon this plastic nature that Valentine Hawkehurst became fully awakened to the degradation of his position, and possessed with an earnest desire to emerge from the great dismal swamp of bad company. Then, and then only, began the transformation which was ultimately to become so complete a change. Some influence, even beyond that of happy love, was needed to give force to this man's character; and in the great terror of the last three months that influence had been found. The very foundations of Valentine Hawkehurst's life had been shaken, and, come what might, he could never be again what he had been.

He had almost lost her. All was said in that. She had been almost taken from him — she, who to this man was father, mother, wife, household, past, present, future, glory, ambition, happiness—everything except that God who ruled above and held her life and his peace in the hollow of His hand. He had been face to face with death; and never, in all the years to come—never in the brightest hour of future happiness, could he forget the peril that had come upon him, and might come again. He had learned to understand that he held her, not as a free gift, but as a loan—a treasure to be reclaimed at any moment by the God who lent her.

The darksome valley was past, and Valentine stood by his darling's side, safe upon the sunlit uplands.

The doctors had declared their patient safe. The hour of

danger had been passed in safety, and the mischief worked by the poisoner's slow process had been well nigh counteracted by medical skill.

"In six weeks' time you may take your wife for her honeymoon tour, Mr. Hawkehurst, with her health and spirits thoroughly re-established," said Dr. Jedd.

"What is that you say about honeymoon tours?" cried Gustave Lenoble. "Hawkehurst and his wife will spend their honeymoon at Côtenoir; is it not, Diana?"

Diana replied that it was to be, and must be so.

It was impossible to imagine a happier party than that which met day after day in those pleasant lodgings at Kilburn, wherein Georgy and Diana and Charlotte had been established with much devotion and care on the parts of Valentine and Gustave. Mr. Hawkehurst had chosen the apartments, and M. Lenoble had spent the day before the wedding in rushing to and fro between the West End and Kilburn, carrying hot-house flowers, comestibles of all kinds from Fortnum and Mason's, bonbon boxes, perfumery, new books, new music, and superintending the delivery of luxurious easy-chairs, hired from expensive upholsterers, a grand piano, and a harmonium.

"We will have music in the evenings," he said to Diana, upon her expressing surprise on beholding these arrangements, "when we are assembled here, all. How thou dost open thine eyes on beholding these nothings! Do you think it has been no pleasure to me to testify my affection for one who has been so good to thee—thy friend, thine adopted sister? I wished that all things should look bright around her, when they brought her here, after that she had come to escape from the jaws of death. And thou, was it not that thou wert also coming to make thy home here for some days, until thy day of marriage? Thy father astonishes himself to hear of such sudden events. Thou wilt go to see him, soon, is it not?"

"Yes, dear Gustave. I will go to-morrow."

She went on the next day, and found Captain Paget much weaker than on her last visit.

It was evident that for him the end was very near. He was much changed and subdued by his long illness; but the spirit of worldliness had not been altogether exorcised even in this dismal period of self-communion.

"What does it all mean, Diana?" he asked. "I don't understand being kept in the dark like this. Here are you suddenly leaving Mr. Sheldon's house without rhyme or reason, to take up your quarters in lodgings with Mrs. Sheldon. Here is a mysterious marriage taking place at a time when I have been given to understand that one of the parties is at death's door;

and here is Lenoble introduced to Valentine Hawkehurst, in express opposition to my particular request that my future son-in-law should be introduced to none of the Sheldon set."

"Valentine is not one of the Sheldon set, papa. I do not think it likely that he will ever see Philip Sheldon again."

"Bless my soul!" exclaimed Captain Paget. "There has been something serious going on, then, surely?"

After this he insisted on an explanation, and Diana told him the story of the last two or three weeks: Charlotte's increasing illness—so mysterious and incurable; the sudden return from Harold's Hill; Valentine's fears; Dr. Jedd's boldly-expressed opinion that the patient was the victim of foul play; the systematic exclusion of Philip Sheldon from the sick-room, followed immediately by symptoms of amelioration, leading to gradual recovery.

All this Captain Paget heard with an awe-stricken countenance. The distance that divides the shedder of blood from all other wrong-doers is so great, that the minor sinner feels himself a saint when he contemplates the guilt of the greater criminal.

"Great God! is this possible?" exclaimed the Captain, with a shudder. "And I have taken that man's hand!"

Later in the evening, when Diana had left him, and he had been thinking seriously of his own career, and those many transactions of his troubled life which, in the slang denomination of the day, would be called "shady," he derived some scrap of comfort from one consideration.

"I never hurt a worm," he murmured to himself, complacently. "No, I can lay my hand upon my heart and say, I never hurt a worm."

The Captain did not pause to reflect that some of the merit involved in this amiable trait of character might have been referable to the fact, that he had never happened to fall upon a state of society in which a comfortable living was to be made by the hurting of worms. He thought only of the story he had heard about Philip Sheldon; and he told himself that not in the direst necessity of his life could his brain have fashioned the thought of such a deed as that, in the doing of which this man had persevered for nearly three months.

For Charlotte Hawkehurst the summer days which succeeded her marriage passed very quietly. She had not been told the real motive of that hasty and stolen marriage which had given her to the man she loved and trusted so completely. Valentine and Diana had between them contrived to mould Mrs. Sheldon to their will; and it was at her request that Charlotte had consented to so strange a step.

The fable invented to account for this desire on the part of Mrs. Sheldon was very innocent. The doctors had ordered a milder climate than England for the dear convalescent—Madeira, Algeria, Malta—or some other equally remote quarter of the globe. It was impossible that Mr. or Mrs. Sheldon could take so long a journey; Mr. Sheldon being bound hand and foot to the mill-wheel of City life, Mrs. Sheldon being the slave and helpmeet of her husband. Nor could dear Charlotte go to Malta alone, or attended only by faithful Diana Paget. In short, there was no course so obvious or so prudent as a hasty marriage, which would enable the invalid to seek a milder clime, accompanied and guarded by her natural protector—a husband.

"Consent, dearest, I entreat you," wrote Valentine, in the little note which supported Mrs. Sheldon's request, "however strange our wishes may seem to you. Believe that it is for the best, for your own sake, for the sake of all who love you, and ask no questions. Say only yes."

To the prayer in this letter, to the entreaties of her mother and Diana, Charlotte yielded. She wondered why Mr. Sheldon avoided her, and asked anxiously, on more than one occasion, why she did not see that gentleman.

"Is papa ill," she asked, "that he never comes to see how I am?"

"The doctors have forbidden many people in your room, dear."

"Yes, a few days ago, when I was so very ill; but now that I am better, papa might come. I want to thank him for all his anxious care of me, and to be sure that *he* consents to this marriage."

"My darling, be assured the marriage is for the best," pleaded Diana.

And the marriage took place.

Charlotte's innocent soul was thus spared the pain of a revelation which must have cast a dark shadow on the bright beginning of her wedded life. Georgy pledged herself to keep the fatal secret from her daughter; and Diana Paget rewarded her discretion by the most patient attention to her piteous and prosy lamentations upon the iniquity of mankind in general, and Philip Sheldon in particular.

Of that hideous secret of the past, lately revealed by Mr. Burkham, Mrs. Sheldon had been told nothing. No good end could have been served by such a revelation. The criminal law has its statute of limitations—unwritten, but not the less existent. A crime which would have been difficult of proof at the time of its commission must after the lapse of twelve years have travelled beyond the pale of justice. For three people to come forward and declare that at the time of Mr. Halliday's death

they had suspected Mr. Sheldon of poisoning him, would be to prove nothing to the minds of a British jury, except that the three people in question were libellous and ill-disposed persons. The greater the issue, the wider the chances of escape given to the accused; and a petty offender will be condemned for picking a pocket upon much lighter grounds than will be considered sufficient to prove a man guilty of blowing up the Houses of Parliament.

CHAPTER II.

AFTER THE WEDDING.

The manner in which Mr. Sheldon would act in the future was a matter of considerable fear to his wife. She had a hazy idea that he would come to the pleasant Kilburn lodgings to claim her, and insist upon her sharing his dreary future.

"If I could only have a divorce," she said piteously, when she discussed the subject with her son-in-law. "There ought to be divorces for such dreadful things; but I never heard of one before Sir Creswick Creswick, or the new judge, whose name I can't remember. O Valentine, I cannot live with him; I cannot sit down to dinner day after day with such a man as that. And to think that I should have known him when I was the merest girl, and have danced my very first polka with him when it first came in, and people wore polka boots and polka jackets, and wrote their notes of invitation upon polka paper, and sang polka songs, and worked polking peasants in Berlin wool, and went on altogether in the most absurd manner. And O Valentine, whom can one trust, if not the man one has known all one's life?"

Mr. Hawkehurst pledged himself to protect his mother-in-law from any attempt at persecution upon the part of her husband He did not know what difficulties he might have to encounter in the performance of this pledge; for, in his ignorance of the stockbroker's desperate circumstances, he imagined that Philip Sheldon would make some attempt to right himself in the eyes of the world, by compelling his wife to reassume her position in his house.

He went to George Sheldon's office within a few days after his marriage to take counsel from that astute adviser. He found the lawyer hard at work, and in very good spirits. It was by his advice the marriage had been hurried on; Charlotte's stealthy removal from the house while Philip Sheldon slum-

bered had been planned by him; and he was triumphant in the thought that the plot had succeeded so well, and that Philip, the coolest and deepest of schemers, had been so completely baffled.

"That Ann Woolper is a treasure," he said; "I didn't think it was in her to do what she has done. Nothing could be neater than the way she kept Phil at bay; and nothing could be better than her tact and cleverness in getting Charlotte and her mother quietly off the other morning while my precious brother was in the land of nod."

"Yes, she has been invaluable to us."

"And that girl Paget, too; she has turned out a regular trump. I used to think her a very stiff, consequential piece of goods when I saw her at the Lawn; but, egad, she has shown herself the genuine metal all through this business. Now that's a young woman I wouldn't mind making Mrs. George Sheldon any day in the week."

"You do her too much honour," said Valentine, with an internal shiver. "Unhappily, a prior engagement will prevent Miss Paget's availing herself of so excellent an opportunity."

"It mayn't be such a very bad chance as you seem to think it, my friend," George replied, with some indignation. "Whenever the Reverend John Haygarth's estate drops in, I stand to win fifty thousand pounds. And that's not so bad for a start in life. I suppose you haven't forgotten that your wife is heir-at-law to a hundred thousand pounds?"

"No, I have not forgotten her position in relation to the Haygarth estate."

"Humph! I should rather think not. People don't generally forget that kind of thing. But you are uncommonly cool about the business."

"Yes, I have passed through a fiery furnace in which all the bullion in the Bank of England will not serve a man. That kind of ordeal upsets one's old notions as to the value of money. And, again, I have never been able to contemplate Charlotte's inheritance of that fortune as anything but a remote contingency; the business is so slow."

"Yes, but it has been going on. Affidavits have been made; the whole affair is in progress."

"I am glad to hear it. Don't think that I pretend not to value the prospect of wealth; I have only learnt to know that money is not the be-all and end-all of life. I could be very happy with my dear wife if there were no prospect of this Haygarthian inheritance; but if it does come to us, we shall, no doubt, be all the happier. The millionaire sees the world from a very plea-

sant point of view. I should like my dear girl to be the mistress of as fair a home as money can buy for her."

"Yes, and you'd like to have your name stand high in the statistics of Government stockholders. Don't be sentimental, Hawkehurst; that kind of thing won't wash. Thank God, we managed to save poor Tom's daughter from the fangs of my brother Phil. But you can't suppose that I am going to shut my eyes to the fact that this affair has been a very good thing for you, and that you owe your chances of a great fortune entirely to me? You don't pretend to forget *that*, I suppose?" said George Sheldon, with some acrimony.

"Why should I pretend to forget that, or any circumstance of our business relations? I am perfectly aware that you started the hunt of the Haygarths, and that to your investigations is to be traced the discovery that proves my wife a claimant to the estate now held by the Crown."

"Very good; that's outspoken and honest, at any rate. And now, how about our agreement? It's only a parole agreement, but an honest man's word is as good as his bond."

"Our agreement!" repeated Valentine, with a puzzled expression of countenance. "Upon my word, I forget."

"Ah, I thought it would come to that; I thought you would manage to forget the terms agreed upon by you and me in the event of your marriage with Charlotte Halliday. My memory is not so short as yours; and I can swear to a conversation between you and me in this room, in which you consented to my taking half the Haygarthian estate as the price of my discovery and the fair reward of my labours."

"Yes," said Valentine, "I remember that conversation; and I remember saying that the demand was a stiff one, but that I, as Charlotte's future husband, would not oppose such a demand."

"You remember that?"

"I do; and if my wife is willing to consent to your terms, I will hold to my promise."

"Your wife's consent is not wanted. She married you without a settlement, and her rights are merged in yours. To all intents and purposes, *you* are heir-at-law to John Haygarth's estate."

Valentine laughed aloud; the whole affair seemed a tremendous joke. He, the homeless, penniless, friendless reprobate of but one year ago—he, the son and heir of a man who had been always on the verge of social shipwreck for want of five pounds—he, of all other men upon this earth, claimant against the Crown for an estate worth one hundred thousand pounds!

"The whole affair seems ridiculously improbable," he said.

"My brother wouldn't have done what he did if the whole thing had seemed improbable to him. However, we needn't estimate the chances for or against; all I want is a legal agreement between you and me, securing my share of the plunder."

"I am ready to execute any reasonable agreement; but I am bound to protect my wife's interests, and I must have a solicitor to act for me in this affair. Greek must meet Greek, you know."

"Very good. I could have conducted the business myself without the interference of strangers; but if you are going in for extreme caution, you'd better leave your wife's affairs in the hands of Messrs. Greenwood and Greenwood, who have acted for her hitherto, and have all papers relating to the case in their possession."

"Greenwood and Greenwood? My dear girl told me she had signed some document, and had seen some lawyers; but she did not tell me the nature of the document, or the name of the lawyers. I have forborne to speak to her on business matters. The treatment that she has undergone has left her very nervous, and we try to keep all unpleasant subjects out of her mind."

"Yes, that's all very well; but business is business, you know. You'd better see Messrs. Greenwood and Greenwood at once. Tell them of your marriage. You'll have to keep Phil's conduct dark, of course; that is understood between us. You must say the marriage was a love-match against my brother's wish, romantic, sentimental, and so on. They'll raise no objections when they find you are willing to leave the case in their hands."

"You have heard nothing of your brother?"

"Well, no—nothing, or next to nothing. I called at his office yesterday. He has not been there since the beginning of Charlotte's illness, and there has been no letter or message for Orcott since your wedding-day. Things look rather piscatorial, altogether. Orcott hints that Phil's affairs are in queer street; but he's a shallow-headed fool, and knows very little. It seems, by his account, that Phil was a Bull, and that the fall in every species of stock has been ruin to him. You see, when a man once goes in for the Bull business, he never by any chance turns Bear—and *vice versâ*. There's a kind of infatuation in the thing, and a man sticks to his line until he's cleaned out—at least, that's what stockbrokers have told me—and I believe it's pretty near the truth."

This was all that Valentine could ascertain about Mr. Sheldon at present. Every knock fluttered Georgy; every accidental

visitor at the Kilburn villa seemed like the swooping of eagle on dovecote.

"I cannot get over the feeling that he will come and take me away with him," she said. "If Sir Wilde Creswick would only do something, so that my second husband mayn't be able to insist upon my living in that dreadful, dreadful house, where I suffered such nights and days of agony, that I am convinced the sight of chintz curtains lined with pink will make me wretched as long as I live!"

"My dear Mrs. Sheldon, he shall not come," said Valentine.

"If I could only go ever so far away from him, and feel that there was the sea, or something of that kind, between us!"

"We will take you away—across the British Channel, or further still, if you like. Diana and M. Lenoble are to be married soon; and directly Lotta is strong enough for the journey we are to go over to Normandy, to their château."

"Château, indeed!" Mrs. Sheldon exclaimed peevishly. "The idea of Diana Paget, without a sixpence, and with a regular scamp of a father, marrying a man with a château, while my poor Charlotte——! I don't wish to wound your feelings, Mr. Hawkehurst, but it really does seem hard."

"It is hard that Lotta should not have married a prince—all the grandeurs of a prince in a fairy tale would only be her due; but it happens fortunately, you see, dear Mrs. Sheldon, that our sweet girl has simple tastes, and does not languish for jewels or palaces. If she should ever become rich——"

"Ah," sighed, Georgy despondently, "I don't expect that. I can't understand anything about this idea of a fine fortune that Mr. Sheldon had got into his head. I know that my husband's mother was a Miss Meynell, the daughter of a carpet-warehouseman in the city, and I can't see how any grand fortune is to come to Charlotte through her. And as for the Hallidays—Hyley and Newhall farms were all the property they ever owned within the memory of man."

"The fortune for which Charlotte is a claimant comes from the maternal ancestor of Christian Meynell. I do not count upon her possession of it as a certain good in the future. If it comes we will be thankful."

"Is it a very large sum of money?"

"Well, yes; I believe it is a considerable sum."

"Twenty thousand pounds, perhaps?"

"I have been told that it is as much."

He did not want Georgy's weak mind to become possessed of the idea of shadowy wealth. He remembered what Philip Sheldon had said to him on the Christmas night in which they

had paced the little Bayswater garden together, and he felt that there was a substratum of common sense in that scoundrel's artful warning.

CHAPTER III.

GREEK AGAINST GREEK.

VALENTINE HAWKEHURST called upon Mr. Greenwood, of the firm of Greenwood and Greenwood, within a week of his marriage, and exhibited the certificate to that gentleman. Mr. Greenwood received the information with much solemnity, and even severity, of manner.

"Are you aware that this is a very serious step which you have taken, Mr. Hawkehurst?" he demanded, sternly. "You entrap—that is to say, you persuade a lady into a hasty marriage—without consultation with her legal advisers, without settlements of any kind whatever—while at the same time you are aware that the lady in question is heir-at-law to a very large fortune, proceedings for the recovery of which are now pending. Pardon me if I observe that there is a want of delicacy—of—a—hem—right-mindedness in the transaction."

"The imputation contained in your remarks is not a pleasant one, Mr. Greenwood," Valentine remarked quietly; "but I am quite willing to pardon any injustice which you may inflict upon me by your desire to protect the interests of your client. I think you will speedily discover that those interests are in no way endangered by the lady's marriage with me. There are social complications which are not to be settled by either law or equity. Miss Halliday's surroundings of the last few months were of a very painful nature; so painful, that the legal protection of marriage became the only means of saving her from imminent peril. I cannot enter more fully into those painful circumstances. I can only assure you that I married your client with the consent and approval of her only near relation, and uninfluenced in the smallest degree by mercenary considerations. Whatever post-nuptial settlement you please to make for my wife's protection I shall promptly execute."

"You express yourself in a very honourable and highly creditable manner, Mr. Hawkehurst," exclaimed the lawyer, with sudden cordiality; "and I beg distinctly to withdraw any offensive observations I may have made just now. Your own affairs are, I conclude, in a sufficiently solvent state?"

"I do not owe a sixpence."

"Good; and Mr. Sheldon, the lady's stepfather and my client—had you his approval for this hasty marriage?"

"The marriage took place without Mr. Sheldon's knowledge or consent."

"May I ask your reason for this secrecy?"

"No, Mr. Greenwood; it is just that one reason that I cannot tell you. Accept my assurance that it was an all-powerful reason."

"I am compelled to do so, if you decline to confide in my discretion; but as Mr. Sheldon is my client, I am bound to think of his interests as well as those of Miss Halliday—er—Mrs. Hawkehurst. I am somewhat surprised that he has not called upon me since the marriage. He has been made aware of that circumstance, I suppose?"

"Yes; I wrote to him immediately after the ceremony, enclosing him a copy of the certificate."

"The marriage will make a considerable difference to him."

"In what manner?"

"Well, in the event of his stepdaughter's death. If she had died unmarried and intestate, this fortune would have gone to her mother; besides which, there was the insurance on Miss Halliday's life."

"An insurance!"

"Yes. Were you not apprised of that fact? Mr. Sheldon, with very natural precaution, insured his stepdaughter's life for a considerable sum—in point of fact, as I believe, five thousand pounds; so that, in case of her death prior to the recovery of the Haygarth estate, her mother might receive some solatium."

"He had insured her life!" said Valentine, under his breath.

This, then, was the key to the mystery. The Haygarthian inheritance was but a remote contingency, a shadowy prize, which could scarcely have tempted the secret assassin; but the insurance had offered the prospect of immediate gain. The one link wanting to complete the chain of evidence against Philip Sheldon was found. There was no longer a question as to his motive.

"This man knows of one insurance on her life," Valentine thought to himself; "there may have been more than one."

After a brief silence, in which Mr. Hawkehurst had been lost in thought, the lawyer proceeded to discuss the terms of the post-nuptial settlement necessary for the protection of his client's interests. In the course of this discussion Valentine explained his position in relation to George Sheldon, and stated the demands of that sharp practitioner.

Mr. Greenwood was utterly aghast upon hearing Mr. Hawkehurst's views on this subject.

"You mean to tell me that this man claims a clear half of the Haygarth estate—fifty thousand pounds—in consideration of his paltry discoveries!"

"Such is the demand he has made, and which I have pledged myself not to oppose. He certainly does open his mouth very wide; but we are bound to consider that but for these discoveries of his, my wife and my wife's relatives would in all probability have gone down to their graves in ignorance of their claim to this estate."

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Hawkehurst. If Mr. George Sheldon had not made the discovery, some one else would have made it sooner or later, depend upon it. There would have been a little loss of time, that is all. There are plenty of men of George Sheldon's class always on the look-out for such chances as this—and for very small chances in comparison to this. Why, I know a fellow, a Frenchman, called Fleurus, who will take as much trouble about a few hundred pounds' worth of unclaimed stock as this man, George Sheldon, has taken about the Haygarth succession. And he has really the impudence to claim fifty thousand pounds from you?"

"A claim which I have pledged myself not to oppose."

"But which you have not pledged yourself to support. My dear Mr. Hawkehurst, this is a business which you must allow me to settle for you, as your wife's legal adviser. We will consider you quite out of the question, if you please; you will thus come out of your relations to Mr. George Sheldon with perfectly clean hands. You will not oppose his claim; but I shall oppose him in my character of legal adviser to your wife. Why, are you aware that this man executed an agreement with his brother, consenting to receive a fifth share of the estate, and costs out of pocket, in complete acquittance of all claims? I have an abstract of the agreement amongst Miss Halliday's—Mrs. Hawkehurst's papers."

After some further discussion, Valentine agreed to leave the whole matter in Mr. Greenwood's hands. Greek must meet Greek. Gray's Inn and the Fields must settle this business between themselves.

"I am only prince consort," he said, with a smile. "I pretend to no actual interest in my wife's estate. I doubt, indeed, whether I should not have felt more complete happiness in our marriage if she had not been heiress to so large a fortune."

At this Mr. Greenwood laughed outright.

"Come, come, Mr. Hawkehurst," he exclaimed, "that really won't do. I am an old stager, you know—a man of the world;

– and you mustn't ask me to believe that the idea of your wife's expectations can afford you anything but unqualified satisfaction."

"You cannot believe? No, perhaps not," Valentine answered, thoughtfully. "But you do not know how nearly these expectations have lost me my wife. And even now, when she is mine by virtue of a bond that only death can loosen, it seems to me as if her wealth would make a kind of division between us. There are people who will always consider me a lucky adventurer, and look at my marriage as the result of clever scheming. I cannot advertise to the world the fact that I loved Charlotte Halliday from the first hour in which I saw her, and asked her to be my wife three days before I discovered her claim to John Haygarth's estate. A man can't go through the world with his justification pinned upon his breast. I think it will be my fate to be misjudged all my life. A twelvemonth ago I cared very little about the opinions of my fellow-men; but I want to be worthy of my wife in the esteem of mankind, as well as in the depths of my own moral consciousness."

"Go and finish your honeymoon," said the lawyer, digging his client in the ribs with elephantine playfulness; "the moon must be in her first quarter, I should think. Go along with you, and leave me to tackle Mr. George Sheldon."

CHAPTER IV.

ONLY A DREAM

"I say, Lenoble," Captain Paget began abruptly one afternoon when his daughter and his future son-in-law were in attendance upon his sofa, "when are you and Diana to be married? There is nothing to hinder your marriage now, you know."

Diana looked at the speaker with a grave countenance.

"Dear papa, there can be no marriage while you are so ill," she said gently.

"And afterwards, when I'm gone, you won't like to marry within six months of your father's funeral; and you will be left alone in the world. You can't hang on to Hawkehurst and his wife. The best thing you can do, Lenoble, is to marry her out of hand, and let me see her by my bedside as Madame Lenoble of Côtenoir. It will be some consolation for me to see that day. I thought to have shared your home, with a run to Paris occa-

sionally just to freshen myself up a little; but that's all over now. It does seem rather hard to me sometimes; and I think of Moses, and his forty years in the Desert with those ill-conditioned Israelites, who were always getting into some scrape or other—setting up golden calves, and that kind of thing—if he turned his back on them for twenty-four hours. A pack of ungrateful beggars too, always ready for mutiny—regular radicals, begad! And he went through it all: the sand, and the *toujours* quails, and the ingratitude; and after forty years of it, when he saw the Promised Land stretched before him green and fertile on the other side of the river—he died! I've been through my desert, the dreary wanderings over the barren sand, and the ingratitude of men I've served. Yes, I've gone through it all; and just as I catch a glimpse of Canaan, the curtain drops."

On this they comforted him; and sustained him with the promise of a brighter Canaan than Côtenoir.

"Yes," he said in a dreamy voice, "I read about it very often. A city with foundations of jasper and chalcedony, emerald and sardonyx; gates of pearl, pavements of gold. That's what St. John the Evangelist saw in his vision; and we've only *his* word for it. But there's something that I can believe and can understand: 'In my Father's house there are many mansions.' There's more hope for a sinful man of the world in that promise than in all St. John's dreams about gates of pearl and foundations of emerald."

The Captain was failing fast. He had exchanged his easy-chair for a sofa now; and the time seemed near at hand when he must exchange the sofa for his bed. After that there would remain but one last change, to the contemplation whereof the sick man was becoming daily more reconciled.

He had read his Gospel more diligently of late, and had taken comfort from those sublime pages. Do they not contain consolation, hope, promise for all—for the weary man of the world as well as for the saint? There is to be found the only creed that can adapt itself to every condition of life, and has a margin wide enough for every weakness of erring humanity. Buddhism may contain a scheme of morality almost as perfect; Mahomet may have expounded hopes that seem well-nigh as divine; but in the Gospel is the only system that will adapt itself at once to the culture of the spiritual man, and the active life of the practical worker in this lower world.

Gustave Lenoble was only too glad to claim his promised wife a little sooner than he had hoped to claim her. "Thou hast put me off long enough, cruel," he said; "and now it is thy father's wish that our marriage should be soon. It shall be this

week; I will take no longer thine excuses. We shall be the sooner ready to receive thy friends, thy Charlotte and her Hawkehurst."

Diana smiled.

"Dear Gustave, you are always kind," she said.

It was very sweet to her to think that her new home would afford a pleasant haven for that dear friend who had sheltered her. And with Charlotte, the dear adopted sister, would come the man she had once loved, to share whose cares had once been the brightest dream.

She wondered at her own inconstancy on perceiving how completely the dream had flown. Before the stern realities of life—before sickness and sorrow and the dread shadow of death—that schoolgirl's vision had utterly melted away. It is just possible that Gustave's manly outspoken love may have helped to blot from the tablet of her mind the fantastic picture of the life that might have been. She scarcely knew whether this was so; but she did know that a new and happier existence began for her from the hour in which she gave her heart in all truth and loyalty to Gustave Lenoble.

The wedding was arranged to take place within a week of Captain Paget's expressly declared wish. It was to be solemnised at a church near Knightsbridge, and again at a Catholic chapel in the neighbourhood of Sloane-street; by which double ceremonial a knot would be tied that no legal quibble could hereafter loosen. Charlotte was just sufficiently recovered to obtain permission to be present at the ceremonial, after some little exercise of her persuasive powers with the medical practitioner to whose care Dr. Jedd had committed her when all danger was past.

The Captain protested, with an eager insistence, that the wedding breakfast should be eaten at his domicile.

"And Val," he said, "be sure Val is with you. I have a secret to tell him—a kind of atonement to make; some news to give him that he won't quite relish, perhaps. But that's no fault of mine."

"No bad news, I hope, papa; for Charlotte's sake as well as for Valentine's."

"That depends upon how they both take it. Your friend Charlotte is not particularly fond of money, is she?"

"Fond of money, papa? A baby knows as much of the value of money as Lotta. Except to give to beggars in the streets, or to buy pretty frivolous presents for her friends, she has neither use nor desire for money. She is the most generous, most disinterested of created beings."

"I'm very glad to hear it," said the Captain, drily. "And

how about Hawkehurst, now? Do you think it was a real love-match, his marriage with Miss Halliday? No *arrière pensée*—no looking out for the main chance at the bottom of his romantic attachment, eh, Di?"

"No, papa. I am sure there was never truer love than his. I saw him under most trying circumstances, and I can pledge myself for the truth of his devotion."

"I am very glad to hear it. Be sure you bring Hawkehurst and his wife to my little breakfast. A chicken, a pine, a bottle of sparkling hock, and a fond father's blessing, are all I shall give you; but the chicken and the hock will be from Gunter, and the blessing from the bottom of a paternal heart."

Bright shone the day that gave Diana to her husband, and very beautiful looked the bride in her simple dress. Gustave Lenoble's marriage was no less quietly performed than that union which had secured the safety of Charlotte Halliday and the happiness of Valentine Hawkehurst. The shadow of death hovered very near bride and bridegroom; for they knew full well that he who was to preside that day at their simple marriage-feast would soon have tasted that last sacred cup which has no after-flavour of bitterness.

The breakfast promised by the Captain was arranged with much elegance. Hothouse flowers and fruits; wines with the icedew sparkling on the dark glass; chickens and tongue, idealized by the confectioner's art, and scarcely recognizable beneath rich glazings and embellishments of jellies and forcemeats; the airiest and least earthly of lobster salads, and a pyramid of coffee-ice, testified to the glory of the Belgravian purveyor. It had been pleasant to Captain Paget to send his orders to Gunter, certain of funds to meet the bill. It was almost a glimpse of that land of milk and honey, that Canaan in Normandy, which he was never to inhabit.

He was very weak, very ill; but the excitement of the occasion in some measure sustained and revivified him. The man who had been engaged to nurse and wait upon him had attired him with much care in a dressing-gown as elegant as the robe in which he had disported himself, a penniless young cornet, in his luxurious garrison quarters, some fifty years before. His loose white locks were crowned with an embroidered smoking-cap; his patrician instep was set off by a dainty scarlet slipper. He had put away the Gospel, and all thoughts of that dread reckoning which he had really some shadowy desire and hope to settle satisfactorily, by some poor dividend which might discharge his obligations to that merciful Creditor who forgives so

many just debts. To-day he was of the world, worldly. It was a kind of *ante-mortem* lying-in-state—his last levee; and he was equal to the occasion.

The prettily adorned table was drawn near the sofa where the invalid host reclined, supported by numerous pillows. His daughter and her husband, Valentine, Charlotte, and Georgy, made a little circle about him. His own man, and a clerical-looking person from Gunter's, assisted at the airy banquet. Very little was eaten by any of the guests, and it was a relief to every one when the clerical personage and Captain Paget's factotum retired, after serving tea and coffee with funereal solemnity.

Valentine Hawkehurst was all gentleness and cordiality towards his old taskmaster. The wrong must indeed be dire which is considered in such an hour as this. Valentine remembered only that with this old man he had seen many troubled days; and that for him the end of all earthly wanderings was very near.

The little banquet was not served in Captain Paget's ordinary sitting-room. For this distinguished occasion the landlady had lent a dining-room and drawing-room on the ground floor, just deserted by a fashionable bachelor lodger who had left town at the close of the season. This drawing-room on the ground floor, like the room above, overlooked the Park, and to this apartment the Captain requested his guests to adjourn, with the exception of Mr. Hawkehurst, some little time after the departure of the servants.

"I want to have a few words with Val in private," he said; "I have a secret to communicate. Diana, show Mrs. Hawkehurst the Drive. You can see the Row from my room, but not from these lower windows. There are a good many carriages still, but it is too late for the *crême de la crême*. I remember when the West End was a desert at this time of year; but I have lived to see the levelling of all distinctions, those of time as well as of class."

Charlotte and Diana retired to the adjoining room with Mrs. Sheldon and M. Lenoble. Valentine was at a loss to imagine what manner of confidential communication his late patron and employer could desire to impart to him. The cautious Horatio waited until the rest of the party were quite out of hearing, talking gaily by the open window, beyond which appeared all the fluttering life and motion of summer leaves, all the brightness of summer green below, and deep blue sky above. When they seemed to him to be quite engaged with their own conversation, Captain Paget turned to his old companion.

"Val," he said, "we have seen hard times together we've

roughed it among strange places and strange people, you know and so on; and I think there is a friendly kind of feeling between us?"

He held out his poor wasted hand, and Valentine grasped it firmly in his own with prompt cordiality.

"My dear governor, I have no feeling in my heart that is not friendly to you."

This was perfectly true.

"And even if I had been inclined to bear any grudge against you on account of the old days, when, you know, you were a little apt to be indifferent as to what scrape you left me in, provided you got off scot-free yourself; if I had been inclined to remember that kind of thing (which, on my honour, I am not), your daughter's noble courage and devotion in the time of my dear wife's peril should have stood against that old wrong. I cannot tell you how deeply I feel her goodness in that bitter time."

"She is a Paget," murmured the Captain, complacently. "*Noblesse oblige.*"

Valentine could scarcely refrain from a smile as he remembered the many occasions upon which the obligations of a noble lineage had weighed very lightly on his aristocratic patron.

"Yes, Val," the Captain resumed, in a dreamy tone, "we have seen many strange things together. When I began my travels through this world, in the palmy days of the Regency, I little thought what a weary journey it was to be, and what queer people I was to encounter among my fellow-passengers. However, I've come to the last stage of the long journey now, and I thank Providence that it ends so comfortably."

To this Valentine assented kindly, but he was at a loss to understand why Captain Paget should have required the adjournment of the rest of the party before giving utterance to these mild commonplaces.

For some moments the invalid relapsed into thoughtful silence. Then, rousing himself as if with an effort, he took a few sips of a cooling drink that stood by his side, and began with a startling abruptness.

"You remember your journey to Dorking, Val, last October, when you went to see that mysterious old aunt of yours, eh?"

Valentine blushed as the Captain recalled this cunningly-devised fable.

"Yes," he said gravely; "I remember telling you that I was going to see an aunt at Dorking."

"An aunt who had a little bit of money, eh, Val?" asked the Captain, with a grin.

"Yes. I may have gone so far as to speak of a little bit of money."

"And neither the aunt nor the bit of money ever existed, eh, Val? They were mere figments of the brain; and instead of going to Dorking you went to Ullerton, eh, Val? You stole a march upon me there. You wanted to throw your old chum off the scent, eh? You thought you had got hold of a good thing, and you were afraid your friend and companion might get a share of it."

"Well, you see, my friend and companion had a knack of getting the lion's share. Besides, this good thing was not my own affair. I had to protect the interest of another person—my employer, in point of fact; and it was by his suggestion, and in compliance with his request, that I invented that harmless fiction about Dorking. I don't think there was any dishonourable dealing in the matter. We were soldiers of fortune both; and the stratagem with which I protected myself against you was a very innocent one. You would have employed any stratagem or invented any fiction under the same circumstances. It was a case of diamond cut diamond."

"Precisely; and if the older soldier, if the free lance of many a campaign, got the best of it in the long run, the younger freebooter could hardly think himself ill-used—could he now, Val?"

"Well, no, I suppose not," replied Valentine, puzzled by the significance in the face of his old companion. That sly twinkle in the Captain's eyes, that triumphant smile wreathing the Captain's lips, must surely mean mischief.

Valentine Hawkehurst remembered the vague suspicion that had flashed into his mind on that Christmas Eve when Captain Paget and he had dined together at a West End restaurant, and the Captain had toasted Charlotte Halliday with a smile of sinister meaning. He began to anticipate some startling and unpleasant revelation. He began to understand that in some manner this inscrutible schemer had contrived to overreach him.

"What are you going to tell me?" he asked. "I see there is some lurking mischief in your mind. How was it you were at Ullerton when I was there? I met you on the platform of the station, and I had a vague half suspicion that you followed me up on more than one occasion. I saw a glove in a man's parlour—a glove which I could have sworn to as yours. But when I came back, you were so plausible with your talk of promoting business, and so on, that I was fool enough to believe you. And I suppose you cheated and tricked me after all?"

"Cheated and tricked are hard words, my dear Val," said the

Captain, with delightful blandness. "I had as much right to transact imaginary business in the promoting line at Ullerton as you had to visit a fictitious aunt at Dorking. Self-interest was the governing principle in both cases. I do not think you can have any right to consider yourself injured by me if I did steal a march upon you, and follow close upon your heels throughout that Ullerton business. I do not think that you can have, on moral grounds, any justification for making a complaint against your old ally."

"Well, I suppose you are right enough in that," said Valentine.

"Shake hands upon it, then. I have not very long to live, and I want to feel myself at peace with mankind. You see, if you had come to me in the first place, in a frank and generous spirit, and had said, 'My dear friend, here is a good thing; let us go into it together, and see what there is to be made out of it,' you would have placed the matter on such a footing that, as a man of honour, I should have been bound to regard your interests as my own. But when you set up a separate interest, when you try to throw dust in my eyes, to hoodwink me—me, Horatio Paget, a man of the world, possessed of some little genius for social diplomacy—you attempt to do that which no man ever yet succeeded in doing, and you immediately release me from those obligations which an honourable man holds sacred. It *was* my glove which you saw in Mr. Goodge's parlour. I had a very satisfactory interview with that reverend person while you were absent from Ullerton on some short excursion, as to the purpose of which I am still in the dark. On certain terms Mr. Goodge agreed to give me the privilege of selecting a stated number from the letters of Mrs. Rebecca Haygarth. I have reason to believe that I made a judicious choice; for the information thus obtained placed me at once upon a track which I followed industriously until it led me to a triumphant result."

"I do not understand——" began Valentine; but the Captain did not allow him time to say more.

"You do not understand that there could be any other genealogical line than that which you and George Sheldon fitted together so neatly. You have neither of you the experience of life which alone gives wideness of vision. You discovered the connections of the Haygarth and the Meynell families in the past. That was a step in the right direction. The discovery, so far as it went, was a triumph. You allowed the sense of that triumph to intoxicate you. In a business which of all businesses within the range of man's intellect most requires deliberation and sobriety, you went to work in a fever of haste and excite-

ment. Instead of searching out *all* the descendants of Christian Meynell, you pounce upon the first descendant who comes to hand, and elect her, at your own pleasure, sole heiress to the estate of the deceased John Haygarth. You forget that there may be other descendants of the said Christian Meynell—descendants standing prior to your wife Charlotte in the line of succession."

"I can imagine no such descendants existing," said Valentine, with a puzzled manner. "You seem to have made yourself master of our business; but there is one point upon which you are mistaken. George Sheldon and I did not go to work in a fever of haste. We did fully and thoroughly examine the pedigree of that person whom we—and legal advisers of considerable standing—believe to be the sole heir-at-law to the Haygarth estate; and we took good care to convince ourselves that there was no other claimant in existence."

"What do you call convincing yourselves?"

"Christian Meynell had only three children—Samuel, Susan, and Charlotte. The last, Charlotte, married James Halliday, of Newhall and Hyley farms; the other two died unmarried."

"How do you know that? How do you propose to demonstrate that Samuel and Susan Meynell died unmarried?"

"Susan was buried in her maiden name. Mrs. Halliday, her sister, was with her when she died. There was no question of marriage; nor is there the record of any marriage contracted by Samuel."

"All that is no proof."

"Indeed! I should have thought the evidence sufficient. But, in any case, the *onus probandi* is not upon us. Can you prove the marriage of the Samuel Meynell who died at Calais, or of the Susan Meynell who died in London?"

"I can. Susan Meynell's legitimate son is in the next room. It's an unpleasant kind of revelation to make, Val; as he, the son of one sister, stands prior to your wife, the granddaughter of the other sister, in the order of succession. AND HE TAKES ALL!"

"He takes all!" repeated Valentine, bewildered. "He! Susan Meynell's son?—in the next room? What does all this mean?"

"It means that when Susan was deserted by the scoundrel who took her away from her home, she found an honest fellow to marry her. The name of her husband was Lenoble. Gustave Lenoble yonder, my daughter's husband, is her only child by that marriage. A perfectly legal marriage, my dear Val—everything *en regle*, I assure you. The business is in the hands of Messrs. Dashwood and Vernon of Whitehall—a first-class firm; counsel's opinion most decided as to Lenoble's position. They have bee

rather slow about the preliminary steps; and, *entre nous*, I have not cared to hurry them, for I wanted to get my daughter's marriage over quietly before we began our proceedings in Chancery. It comes rather hard upon you, Val, I allow; but, you see, if you had acted generously, not to say honourably, towards me in the first instance, you'd have had the advantage of my experience. As it is, you have been working in the dark. However, things are not so bad as they might be. You might have married some ugly old harridan for the sake of this Haygarth estate; you have secured a pretty and amiable wife, and you mustn't be downhearted if you find yourself, from a financial point of view, most outrageously sold."

The Captain could not refrain from a laugh as he contemplated his young friend's surprise. The laugh degenerated into a fit of coughing, and it was some little time before the enfeebled Horatio was ready to resume the interrupted conversation. In this pause Valentine had leisure to face this new position. There was for the moment a sharp sense of disappointment. It is not possible for humanity to be quite indifferent to a hundred thousand pounds. So much of the "light and sweetness" of life is attainable for that sum,—such pleasures, of the purest and noblest, are in the power of the possessor. But in this moment Valentine fully realized the fact that he had never taken the idea of this fortune into his mind—never made it part and parcel of himself, to be plucked out of his heart with anguish, and to leave a bleeding wound in the place where it had grown. It seemed to him as if he had been wakened abruptly from some bright bewildering dream; but the sharp pang of mercenary desires disappointed, of sordid hopes suddenly reft, was not for him.

Beyond this sense of uncertainty, which had made the Haygarthian fortune seem at best such "stuff as dreams are made of," there had been ever present in his mind of late the dismal association connected with this money. For this, and to get power over this through the rights of his weak wife, had Philip Sheldon plotted against the life of that sweet girl who was but newly rescued from the jaws of the grave. The bitter memory of those days and nights of suspense could never have been quite dissociated from the money that had been the primary cause of all this slow torture.

"Do you think I shall love my wife any less because she has no claim to the Haygarth estate?" he exclaimed presently, looking with half-contemptuous indignation upon the broken-down schemer. "I loved her long before I knew the name of Haygarth; I should have loved her if I had found her a beggar in the London streets, a peasant-girl weeding for sixpence a day in

some dismal swamp of agricultural poverty and ignorance. I am not going to say that this money would not have brought us pleasure; pictures and gardens, and bright rooms, and books without number, and intercourse with congenial acquaintance and delightful journeyings to all the fairest places upon the earth, and the power to do some good in our generation, and a sense of security for our future, and by-and-by, perhaps, for the future of dear children, for whose prosperity we should be more anxious than for our own. Pleasure the money would most probably have brought for us in abundance; but I doubt if it could buy us more perfect happiness than we may know in the simplest home that my toil can support. Ah, Captain, I question if you ever knew the sweetest sensation life can give—the delight of working for those we love."

Captain Paget stared at his sometime protégé in a kind of rapture of wonder, not entirely unmingled with admiration.

"Egad!" he exclaimed, "I have read of this kind of thing in novels; but in the whole course of my experience I never met with anything equal to it. My son-in-law, Lenoble yonder, is a generous foo—fellow enough; but then, since infancy, he has never known the want of money. And generosity from that kind of man is no more of a virtue than the foolhardiness of a child who pokes his finger into the candle, not knowing the properties of the thing he has to deal with. But anything like generosity from you, from a man reared as you were reared, is, I freely confess, a little beyond my comprehension."

"Yes; it is a transformation, is it not? But I don't think I was ever inordinately fond of money. Your genuine Bohemian rarely is. He is too well schooled in the art of living without cash, and he asks so little here below. His pipe, his friend, his dog, his books, his garret, his billiards, his beer. It is all a question of a few pounds a week. And if, some day, the divine enchanter Love takes the poor fellow under his guidance, and teaches him to do without billiards and beer, your Bohemian settles down into the purest and best of men. Think what Goldy might have been if some good woman had taken compassion upon him and married him, and henpecked him ever afterwards. He might have written as many novels as Sir Walter Scott, and died master of some Hibernian Abbotsford, some fair domain among the bright green hills that look down upon broad Shannon's silvery falls. No, Captain; your intelligence has not annihilated me. I can face the future boldly with my dear young wife upon my arm."

"Upon my soul, Val, you're a very noble fellow!" exclaimed Horatio Paget, with real enthusiasm; "and I am sorry I have kept you in the dark so long."

"You have kept me in the dark? Yes; to be sure. How long have you known this—about Susan Meynell?"

"Well, my dear boy, not very long."

"But how long? A month—two months? Yes; you have known Lenoble's position ever since you knew him; and Charlotte told me three months ago of Diana's engagement to Lenoble. Do you know that if Sheldon had succeeded, Charlotte's blood would have been upon your head? If you had not concealed the truth, his villany would never have been attempted."

"But, my dear Val," exclaimed the Captain piteously, "I was not to know——"

"No; you were not to know that there could be such a wretch as Philip Sheldon upon this earth. We will say no more of that. I kept my secret, you kept yours. Mischief unspeakable well-nigh came of all this underhand work. But heaven has been merciful to us. We have passed through the valley of the shadow of death; and if anything could make my wife dearer to me than she was when first I won her promise to be mine, it would be the sorrow of the last few months. And now I will go and shake hands with Lenoble, my wife's kinsman. He is a fine fellow, and well deserves his good fortune. Stay; one word. Did Diana know this? did she know that her lover is heir to the Haygarth estate?"

"She does not know it now. She has never heard the name of Haygarth. And, between you and me, Val, it cost me a world of trouble to persuade her to say yes to Lenoble's offer, though he is a very decent match for her, even without reference to the Haygarth estate."

"I am glad she knew nothing of this," said Valentine; "I am very glad."

After this he again shook hands with Captain Paget, at that gentleman's request, and the Captain expressed himself much relieved by the conversation, and by his late protégé's very generous behaviour. He called to his daughter and the rest presently, and they came at his summons.

"Is your long talk finished, papa?" asked Diana.

"And is the secret told?" demanded Charlotte of her obedient husband and slave.

"Yes, dear, it is told," he answered gravely.

"I hope it is a pleasant secret."

"I do not think the knowledge of it will give you much pain, dearest. You have learnt to think yourself a—a kind of an heiress of late, have you not?"

"Papa—Mr. Sheldon—told me that I had a claim to some money; but I have not thought much about it, except that I should give you Grote and Macaulay in dark-brown calf, with

bevelled boards and red edges, like that edition you saw at the auctioneer's in Bond Street, and have talked about ever since; and a horse, perhaps; and a glass porch to our cottage."

"Well, darling, the books in dark-brown calf, and the horse, and the glass porch, may all be ours in the future; but the money was only a dream—it has melted away, dear."

"Is that all?" asked Charlotte. "Why, I dare say the day will come when you will be as rich as Sir Walter Scott."

"In the meantime I have something to give you instead of the money."

"Indeed!"

"Yes; a cousin. Will that do as well, my love?"

'A cousin? I shall like her very much if she is nice."

"The cousin I mean is a gentleman."

"But where is he to come from?" cried Charlotte, laughing. Has he dropped from the moon? The only relations I have the world are Uncle and Aunt Mercer. How can you pretend to find me a cousin?"

"Do you remember telling me of your grandmother's only sister—Susan Meynell?"

"Yes," said Charlotte, with a sudden blush; "I remember."

"That Miss Meynell married a gentleman of Normandy, and left one only child, a son. His name is Gustave Lenoble, and he is standing by your side. He is heir-at-law to a very large fortune, which it was once supposed you could claim. Are you sorry, Lotta, to find a kinsman and lose a fortune?—and are you contented to begin the world with no hope except in your husband's patience and courage?"

"And genius!" cried Charlotte, with enthusiasm.

The sweet blinding glamour of love shone upon this young scribbler, and she believed that he was indeed worthy to take rank among the greatest of that grand brotherhood of which he was so humble a member. She looked up at him with the prettiest confidence; her clinging hand clasped his with love and trust immeasurable. He felt and knew that love like this was a treasure beside which the Reverend John Haygarth's hoarded thousands must needs seem but sorry dross.

After this there was much explanation and congratulation. Gustave Lenoble was delighted to claim so fair a kinswoman.

"Thou art like my eldest, my cousin," he said; "Diana saw the likeness at the Sacré Cœur when she beheld my daughter; and I too saw my eldest's look in thine eyes when I first met thee. Remember, it was convened between us that Côtenoir should be a home for thee and for Hawkehurst before I knew what link bound thee to the house of Lenoble. Now thou and thy husband will be of our family.'

Diana was bewildered, grieved, indignant with the father who had deceived her by his studious suppression of the truth. She found herself placed in the position of rival to Charlotte, and the whole proceeding seemed to her mean and treacherous.

But it was no time for remonstrance or open expression of indignant feeling. Her father's days were numbered. She knew this, and she held her peace. Nor did Mrs. Sheldon utter any word of complaint, though the disappointment she experienced upon hearing this revelation was very keen. The idea of the four or five thousand pounds which were to come to Charlotte had been a consolation to her in the midst of that confusion and desolation which had newly come upon her life. She left Knightsbridge that evening somewhat depressed in spirits, and half inclined to be angry with Charlotte and her husband for their gaiety of manner, and evident happiness in each other's society.

"It seems hard to have to begin the world at my age," she murmured hopelessly, "after being accustomed to have everything nice about me, as I had at the Lawn; though I own that the trouble and care of the servants was wearing me to the grave."

"Dear mamma," exclaimed Charlotte tenderly, "there is no fear of trouble or poverty for you or for us. Valentine has plenty of money, and is on the high road to securing a comfortable income. Authors do not starve in garrets now, you know, as they used to do, poor things, when Doctor Johnson ate his dinner in a cave, or something dreadful of that kind; and when Sir Richard Steele thought it quite a wonderful thing to get a pound of tea for his wife. And Valentine's heart is in his profession, and he will work for us."

"As long as I have a hand that can write, and a brain that can guide my pen," interposed Mr. Hawkehurst, gaily. "I have given hostages to Fortune. I can face the hazard boldly. I feel as confident and as happy as if we lived in the golden age, when there was neither care nor toil for innocent mankind, and all the brightest things of earth were the spontaneous gift of the gods."

CHAPTER V.

BOHEMIAN INDEPENDENCE.

Monsieur and Madame Lenoble went to Brighton for their honeymoon. A letter or a telegraphic message would bring them thence swiftly to the bedside of the dying Captain, should the last fatal change set in suddenly. Diana had wished to stay with her father, but Horatio insisted upon the honeymoon trip, and that everything should be done in a correct and gentlemanly manner.

"You can engage rooms at the Albion," Captain Paget had said to his son-in-law a few days before the quiet wedding. "The house is extremely comfortable; and you will be received by a compatriot. The proprietor is a Frenchman, and a very gentlemanly person, I assure you; the *cuisine* irreproachable. I remember the old Steyne when Mrs. FitzHerbert lived close by, and received all the best people, in the days when the Cockney had not yet taken possession of Brighthelmstone, and the Chinese dragons and pagodas were bright and fresh in the Pavilion."

To Brighton, therefore, the bride and bridegroom departed; Diana attended by a maid, an appanage which the Captain had insisted upon. Poor Diana was sorely puzzled as to what she should find for the maid to do when her hair had been dressed early in the morning, and her costume laid out in state for the day.

"I think I must buy some handkerchiefs for her to hem," she said to Gustave; "it will be quite dreadful for her to have nothing to do all day long."

The weather was warm and bright. The sea danced and sparkled under the windows. Gustave was always in the same happy frame of mind. An elegant landau had been secured for the period of their visit, and a pair of capital horses carried them out on long and pleasant expeditions to the pretty Sussex villages, or across the broad bare downs, beyond which the sea stretched blue and bright.

In the evening, when the lamp was lighted and the urn hissed gaily, Diana felt that she and her husband were at home. It was the first home she had known—the first time she had been sole mistress and centre of a household. She looked back at all the old desolation, the dreary shifting from lodging to lodging, the degradation, the self-abasement, the dull apathy of despair; and then she looked across at her husband as he

lounged in his easy-chair, contemplating her with dreamy adoring eye, in a kind of lazy worship; and she knew that for this man she was the centre of the universe, the very keystone in the arch of life.

She stretched out her hand to him with a smile, and he pressed it fondly to his lips. There were twinkling jewels upon the slender fingers; for the prettiest shop in Brighton—the brightest shop in Brighton—had been ransacked that morning by the fond, frivolous, happy husband, as pleased to bedeck his wife as a child to dress her last new doll.

"How can I ever be worthy of so much affection, Gustave!" she exclaimed, as he kissed the twinkling fingers.

And it did indeed seem to her that for this free gift of love she could never render a sufficient recompense.

"Thou wilt make Côtenoir a home," he said; "thou knowest not how I have sighed for a home. This room, with the lamplight shining on thy face, and thy white hands moving about the teacups, and thy sweet smile, which greets me every now and then when thou lookest by here,—it is more of home than I have ever known since I left Beaubocage, that modest dwelling where lived those two angels of kindness, my aunt and my grandmother."

In one of those long pleasant drives to a distant village nestling under the lee of a steep hill, the husband and wife had much serious talk about the position of the former with reference to the Haygarth estate. The result of that conversation was shown in a letter which Charlotte Hawkehurst received the next day from her friend Diana Lenoble.

"Albion Hotel, Brighton.

"Ever dear Lotta,—Gustave and I have discussed the Haygarth business with great satisfaction to ourselves, since it transpired in the course of our conversation that we are both of one mind in the matter. It is agreed between us that, as he is very well off already, and as he never hoped or expected to inherit a fortune from his maternal ancestor, it is only just that he should divide this unlooked-for wealth with his dear cousin, whose claim to that inheritance he recognizes as equal to his own; the mere fact of seniority making only a legal and not a moral difference in the degree of relationship to the Reverend John Haygarth. Do you understand, darling?—*you* are to have half this money. My husband will not step in between you and good fortune. I cannot tell you how happy this determination of Gustave's has made me. I felt myself in a manner base and ungrateful when I thought I was to share wealth that might have been yours; but I ought to have better understood the justice of my

husband's mind. And now, dearest, all will be arranged very simply; Gustave will come to London and see his lawyers, and execute some kind of deed, and the whole affair will be settled.

"We have had some charming drives," &c. &c.

Here the young wife branched off into a description of the simple pleasures of their honeymoon holiday.

This letter was answered by Valentine Hawkehurst in person. He came down to Brighton to thank his friends for their generous desire to enrich his wife, and to decline, on her part, any share in John Haygarth's wealth.

It was in vain that Gustave and Diana argued the point, Mr. Hawkehurst was fixed as fate.

"Believe me, it is better as it is," he said. "Charlotte and I have arrived at this conviction with all due thought and deliberation. We are both young, and the world is all before us. There is much in the past that I have to redeem, as Diana well knows. It is better that I should fight the battle of life unaided, and rise from the ranks by right of my merit as a soldier. If ever we have need of help—if ever I find myself breaking down—you may be sure that it is to you I shall come. By and by, if Providence gives me children to work for, I will refuse no bounty that you may bestow on them. Their future may be rendered secure by your generosity, if you please, Lenoble; they will be your kindred. But for an alien like myself there is no discipline so wholesome as honest hard work. I am as rich as John Milton when he set up a school in St. Bride's Churchyard."

To this resolution Mr. Hawkehurst adhered with a gentle firmness.

"Thou art chivalrous like Don Quixote," said Gustave Lenoble; "but it shall be as thou wouldest. Touch there."

He offered his hand, which the other grasped with all heartiness.

"I will be godfather to thy little first one, and I will settle on him ten thousand pounds before he cuts his first tooth," said Gustave decisively.

CHAPTER VI.

BEYOND THE VEIL.

Diana and her husband did not linger long at Brighton; they went back to town in time to see the last of that old wayfarer whose troubled journey came to so peaceful an ending. It was a very calm haven in which this battered old privateer lay at anchor after life's tempestuous course; but to the Captain himself it seemed a hard thing that he should not have been permitted one brief cruise upon that summer sea which danced so gaily beneath the keel of the Lenobles' prosperous bark.

"We have shared adversity, my love," he said sadly, when he talked with his daughter in the last few days; "but your prosperity I am to have no share in. Well, I suppose I have no right to complain. My life has been an erring one; but poverty is the most viscious companion that a man can consort with. If I had come into six or seven thousand a year, I might have been as starch in my notions as a bishop; but I have been obliged to live, Diana—that was the primary necessity, and I learnt to accommodate myself to it."

That he had erred, the Captain was very ready to acklowledge. That he had sinned deeply, and had much need to repent himself of his iniquity, he was very slow to perceive. But sometimes, in the still watches of the night, when the faint lamplight on the shadowy wall was more gloomy than darkness, when the nurse, hired to assist his own man in these last days, dozed in her comfortable chair, the truth came home to his shallow soul, and Horatio Paget knew that he had been indeed a sinner, and very vile among sinners. Then, for a moment, the veil of self-deception was lifted, and he saw his past life as it had really been,—selfish, dishonourable, cruel beyond measure in reckless injury of others. For a moment the awful book was opened, and the sinner saw the fearful sum set against his name.

"What can wipe out the dread account?" he asked himself. "Is there such a thing as forgiveness for a selfish useless life—a life which is one long offence against God and man?"

In these long wakeful nights the dying man thought much of his wife. The sweet tender face came back to him, with its mournful wondering look. He knew, now, how his falsehoods and dishonours had wounded and oppressed that gentle soul. He remembered how often she had pleaded for the right, and

how he had ridiculed her arguments, and set at naught her tender pleadings. He had fancied her in a manner inimical to himself when she urged the cause of some angry creditor or meek deluded landlady. Now, with the light that is not upon earth or sea shining on the picture of his past career, he could see and understand things as he had never seen or understood them before. He knew now that it was for his own sake that faithful and devoted wife had pleaded, his own interest that had been near to her pitying heart, as well as the interest of bakers and butchers, landladies and tailors.

"She might have made a good man of me, if I had let her have her way," he thought to himself. "I know that *she* is in heaven. Will she plead for me, I wonder, at the foot of the Great Throne? I used to laugh at her bad English, or fly in a passion with her sometimes, poor soul, when I wanted her to pass for a lady, and she broke down outrageously. But *there* her voice will be heard when mine appeals in vain. Dear soul! I wonder who taught her to be so pure and unselfish, and trusting and faithful? She was a Christian without knowing it. 'I thank Thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because Thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes.'"

He thought of his wife's lonely deathbed, and compared it with his own. For him there was luxury; by him watched a devoted and all-forgiving daughter, a generous friend and son-in-law. All that could be done to soothe the painful descent was done for him. For her there had been nothing but loneliness and sorrow.

"But she might be certain of a speedy welcome in a better home," thought Horatio; "and I—? Ah, dear kind creature, *there* the difference was all in her favour."

As the closing scene grew nearer, he thought more and more of his gentle low-born wife, whose hold upon him in life had been so slender, whose memory had occupied until now so insignificant a place in his mind. His daughter watched with him unceasingly in the last two days and nights. His mind wandered. On the day of his death he mistook Diana for that long-lost companion.

"I have not been a kind husband, Mary, my dear," he faltered; "but the world has been hard upon me—debts—difficulties—crack regiment—expensive mess—set of gamblers—no pity on a young man without fortune—force of example—tied a millstone round my wretched neck before I was twenty-one years of age."

Later, when the doctor had felt his pulse for the last time, he cried out suddenly, "I have made a statement of my affairs.

The liabilities are numerous—the assets *nil;* but I rely on the clemency of this court."

These were his last words. He sank into a kind of stupor betwixt sleeping and waking, and in this he died.

CHAPTER VII.

BETTER THAN GOLD.

THE little fleet of paper boats which Mr. Sheldon had pioneered so skilfully over the commercial seas came to grief very soon after the disappearance of the admiral. A bill drawn upon the Honduras Mahogany Company, Limited, was the first to reach maturity. The bill was referred to the drawer—the drawer was not to be found.

"I have not seen Sheldon for the last fortnight," Mr. Orcott informed the gentleman who brought him the document.

"Out of business for a fortnight?"

"He has not been in business for a month. His stepdaughter has been very ill—at death's door, and all that kind of thing, and my governor was awfully cut up about it. There used to be a couple of doctors at the house every day, and no end of fuss. I took Sheldon his letters, and managed matters for him here, and so on. And one fine morning my young lady runs off and gets married on the quiet; so I suspect there was a good deal of shamming about the illness—and those old fogies, the doctors, winked at it. Between them all, I fancy Sheldon was completely sold; and he has turned savage and gone off somewhere in the sulks."

"I wish he had chosen any other time for his sulks," said the holder of the bill; "my partner and I have discounted several acceptances for him. He gave us liberal terms, and we considered any paper of his as safe as a Bank of England note; and now this confounded bill comes back to us through our bankers, noted, 'Refer to drawer'—a most unpleasant thing, you know, and very inconsiderate of Sheldon to leave us in such a fix."

"He has forgotten the bill, I suppose," said Mr. Orcott.

"Well, but you see, really now, a business man ought not to forget that kind of thing. And so Miss Halliday has made a runaway match, has she? I remember seeing her when I

dined at Bayswater—an uncommonly fine girl. And she has gone and thrown herself away upon some penniless scapegrace, most likely? Now, by the bye, how about this Honduras Company, Mr. Orcott; they don't seem to have any London offices?"

"I believe not. We've some of their prospectuses somewhere about, I think. Would you like to see one?"

"I should, very much."

Mr. Orcott opened two or three drawers, and after some little trouble produced the required document.

It was a very flourishing prospectus, setting forth the enormous benefits to be derived by shareholders from the profitable dealings of the company. Some good high-sounding names figured in the list of directors, and the chairman was Captain H. N. Cromie Paget. The prospectus looked well enough, but the holder of Mr. Sheldon's dishonoured bill was not able to derive much comfort from high-sounding phrases and high-sounding names.

"I'll go down to Bayswater, and see if I can hear anything of your governor," he said to Mr. Orcott.

"He was not there yesterday when I called, and his servants could tell me nothing of his whereabouts," the young Yorkshireman said very coolly.

"Indeed!" cried the holder of the dishonoured bill in some alarm. "Now, really, that is not right; a business man ought not to do that kind of thing."

He called a cab and drove to the Lawn. There was the smart gothic villa, with its pointed gables, and florid chimneys, and oriel windows, and in the Tudor casements of the ground-floor appeared the bills of a West-end auctioneer, announcing in large letters that the lease of this charming mansion, together with the nearly new furniture, linen, books, china, plate, carefully-selected proof-prints after distinguished modern artists, small cellar of choice wines, &c., &c., &c., would be disposed of by auction on the following day.

Mr. Sheldon's victim went into the house, where he found some men preparing for the forthcoming sale.

"What is the meaning of all this?" he asked, aghast.

"A bill of sale, sir. Messrs. Napthali and Zabulon."

This was enough. The holder of the bill went back to the City. Another bill came due on the following day, and before the members of the Stock Exchange took their luncheon, it was known that Philip Sheldon's credit was among the things of the past.

"I always thought he was out of his depth," said one set of talkers.

"He was the last man I should have expected to see come to grief," said another set of talkers.

On settling-day came the awful proclamation—Philip Sheldon had absconded, and would not meet his differences.

On the same day came a terrible revelation to Mr. George Sheldon, of Gray's Inn, solicitor, genealogist, and pedigree hunter. The first official step in the advancement of Gustave Lenoble's claim against the Crown was taken by Messrs. Dashwood and Vernon, the solicitors, of Whitehall; and George Sheldon discovered that between Charlotte Hawkehurst and the Haygarth estate there stood a prior claimant, whereby all his toil, trouble, costs out of pocket, and wear and tear of body and mind, had been wasted.

"It is enough to make a man go and cut his throat," cried George, in his first savage sense of utter disappointment.

He went into his slovenly bedroom, and took out one of his razors, and felt the corrugated surface of the left side of his neck meditatively. But the razor was blunt, and the corrugated surface seemed very tough and unmanageable; so George Sheldon decided that this kind of operation was an affair which might be deferred.

He heard the next day that his brother was *non est*, and, in his own phraseology, that there was a pretty kettle of fish in the City.

"Upon my word, Phil and I seem to have brought our pigs to a very nice market," he said. "I dare say, wherever that fellow has gone, he has carried a well-lined purse with him. But I wouldn't have his conscience for all the wealth of the Rothschilds. It's bad enough to see Tom Halliday's face as *I* see it sometimes. What must it be to *him?*"

A little more than a year after this, and the yellow corn was waving on the fertile plains of Normandy, fruit ripening in orchards on hillside and in valley; merry holiday folks splashing and dabbling in the waves that wash the yellow sands of Dieppe; horses coming to grief in Norman steeplechases; desperate gamesters losing their francs and half-francs in all kinds of frivolous games in the Dieppe *établissement;* and yonder, in the heart of Normandy, beyond the tall steeples of Rouen, a happy family assembled at the Château Côtenoir.

One happy family—two happy families rather, but so closely united by the bonds of love and friendship as to seem indeed one. Here are Gustave Lenoble and his young wife Diana, with two tall slender damsels by their side; and here is Valentine Hawkehurst, the successful young scribbler, with his fair young

wife Charlotte; and out on the terrace yonder are two nurses walking with two babies, at that early, and, to some minds, obnoxious stage of babyhood in which a perpetual rocking, and pacing to and fro, and swaying backwards and forwards in the air, is necessary for the preservation of anything approaching tranquillity. But to the minds of the two young mothers and the two proud fathers, these small creatures in their long white robes seem something too bright for earth. The united ages of the babies do not amount to six months; but the mothers have counted every gradual stage of these young lives, and to both it seems as if there had been no time in which the children were not, with so firm a hold have they possessed themselves of every thought in the foolish maternal mind, of every impulse in the weak maternal heart.

Mrs. Hawkehurst has brought her son to see his aunt Diana; for Diana has insisted upon assuming that relationship by letters-patent, as it were. Madame Lenoble's baby is a daughter, and this fact in itself seems to the two friends to be a special interposition of Providence.

"Would it not be delightful if they should grow up to love each other and marry?" exclaimed Diana; and Charlotte agreed with her that such an event in the future did indeed seem in a manner foreshadowed by the conduct of the infants in the present.

"He takes notice of her already!" she exclaimed, looking out at the little creature in white muslin robes, held up against the warm blue sky; "see, they are cooing at each other! I am sure that must be cooing."

And then the two mothers went out upon the sunny terrace-walk and fondly contemplated these domestic treasures, until the domestic treasures were seized with some of the inexplicable throes and mysterious agonies of early babyhood, and had to be borne off shrieking to their nurseries.

"Dear angel," said Gustave, of his "little last one," "she has the very shriek of Clarice here, poignant and penetrating, until to drown the heart. Dost thou figure to thyself that thy voice was penetrating as that, my beautiful, in the time?"

He kissed his beautiful, and she ran off to join the procession following the two babies,—alarmed nurses, distracted mammas, shrieking infants, anxious damsels.

"*C'est un vrai tourbillon*," as Gustave remarked to his companion Valentine Hawkehurst; "these women, how they love their children! What of saints, what of Madonnas, what of angels!"

Whereupon he spouted Victor Hugo:

"Lorsque l'enfant paraît, le cercle de famille
Applaudit à grands cris ; son doux regard qui brille
Fait briller tous les yeux ;
Et les plus tristes fronts, les plus souillés peut-être,
Se dérident soudain à voir l'enfant paraître,
Innocent et joyeux."

All things had gone well for M. Lenoble. His direct descent from Matthew Haygarth, the father of the intestate, had been proved to the satisfaction of Crown lawyers and High Court of Chancery, and he had been in due course placed in possession of the reverend intestate's estate, to the profit and pleasure of his solicitors and M. Fleurus, and to the unspeakable aggravation of George Sheldon, who washed his hands at once and for ever of all genealogical research, and fell back in an embittered and angry spirit upon the smaller profits to be derived from petty transactions in the bill-discounting line, and a championship of penniless sufferers of all classes, from a damsel who considered herself jilted by a fickle swain, in proof of whose inconstancy she could produce documentary evidence of the "pork-chop and tomato sauce" order, to a pedestrian who knocked his head against a projecting shutter in the Strand, and straightway walked home to Holloway to lay himself up for a twelvemonth in a state of mental and bodily incapacity requiring large pecuniary redress from the owner of the fatal shutter. To this noble protection of the rights of the weak did George Sheldon devote his intellect; and when malicious enemies stigmatized these Quixotic endeavours as "speculative actions," or when, in the breaking-down of some oppressed damsel's cause by reason of the slender evidence afforded by some reticent lover's epistolary effusions, unjust judges told him that he "ought to be ashamed of himself" for bringing such an action, the generous attorney no doubt took consolation from an approving conscience, and went forth from that court, to look for other oppressed damsels or injured wayfarers, erect and unshaken.

Some little profit Mr. Sheldon of Gray's Inn did derive from the Haygarth estate; for at the request of Gustave Lenoble Messrs. Dashwood and Vernon sent him a cheque for one thousand pounds, as the price of those early investigations which had set the artful Captain upon the right track. He wrote a ceremoniously grateful letter to Gustave Lenoble on receiving this honorarium. It is always well to be grateful for benefits received from a rich man; but in the depths of his heart he execrated the fortunate inheritor of the Haygarthian thousands.

Mr. Hawkehurst was not quite so vehement in the expression of his feelings as that lively Celt, Gustave; but deep in his heart there was a sense of happiness no less pure and exalted.

Providence had given him more than he had ever dared to hope; not John Haygarth's thousands; not a life of luxurious idleness, and dinner-giving, and Derby days, and boxes on the grand tier, and carriage-horses at five hundred guineas a pair; not a palace in Belgravia, and a shooting-box in the Highlands, and a villa at Cowes; not these things, in which he would once have perceived the *summum bonum;* but a fair price for his labour, a dear young wife, a tranquil home.

Nor had his researches among the dusty records of the departed Haygarths been profitless in a pecuniary sense to himself. Gustave Lenoble insisted that he should accept that honorarium of three thousand pounds which had been promised by George Sheldon as the reward of his success.

"Captain Paget would never have been put on the right track if he had not filched your secrets from you," said the son and heir of Susan Meynell. "It is to your researches, in the first place, that I owe this inheritance; and you cannot refuse to accept the agreed price of your labour."

Valentine did not refuse this fairly-earned reward, nor did he oppose the settlement which Gustave made in favour of Charlotte's infant son. It seemed to him only just that some share of the heritage should fall to the descendant of poor Susan's younger sister and faithful friend.

With this capital of three thousand pounds comfortably invested in consols, and with the interest of that sum of ten thousand pounds settled on his infant son, Mr. Hawkehurst began the world, in his new character of a husband and a father, very pleasantly.

Of his literary career very little need be said here. He was yet at the beginning of the long dusty road that leads to the temple of Fame. It is enough to state that he found the dusty high-road rather difficult walking, and that he was pelted with more mud, flung by nameless assailants hidden behind the hedges, than he had anticipated when he set out upon the first stage of his journey. Happily, he found pleasant fellow-travellers and kindly encouragement from an indulgent public, and was thus able to accept the mud which bespattered his garments in a very placid spirit, and to make light of all obstacles in the great highway.

The cottage at Wimbledon was no longer a dream. It was a pleasant reality, the p ide and delight of Mrs. Sheldon and Ann Woolper. It was a picturesque dwelling-place, half cottage, half villa, situated on the broad high-road from London to King-

ston, with all the woodland of Richmond Park to be seen from the windows at the back. Only a wall divided Mr. Hawkehurst's gardens from the coverts of the Queen. It was like a royal demesne, Charotte said; whereupon her husband insisted that it should be christened by the name of a royal dwelling, and so called it Charlottenburgh.

Mr. Hawkehurst had secured this delightful abode for a considerable term of years, and upon the furnishing and decoration of the pretty rustic rooms Charlotte and he lavished unmeasured care. The delicious excitement of "picking up," or, in more elegant parlance, "collecting," was to these two happy people an inhexaustible source of pleasure. Every eccentric little table, every luxurious chair, had its special history, and had been the subject of negotiation and diplomacy that might have sufficed a Burleigh in the reorganization of Western Europe. The little Dresden and Vienna cups and saucers in the maple cabinet had been every one bought from a different dealer. The figures on the mantelpiece were Old Chelsea, of a quality that would have excited the envy of a Bernal or a Bohn, and had only fallen to the proud possessors by a sequence of fortuitous circumstances, the history of which was almost as thrilling as the story of Boehmer's diamond-necklace. The curtains in the drawing-room had draped the *portières* of the lovely Lady Blessington, and had been bought for a song by Valentine Hawkehurst, after passing through the hands of brokers and dealers innumerable. The tapestry-covered Louis-Quatorze chairs had belonged to Madame de Sévigné, and had furnished that dull country house whence she wrote the liveliest letters extant to her disreputable cousin, Bussy, Count of Rabutin. These inestimable treasures had been picked up by Mr. and Mrs. Hawkehurst from a bric-à-brac merchant in a little court at the back of the Rue Vivienne, whither the young couple had gone arm-in-arm to choose a bonnet on their first pleasure-trip to Paris. The clock in the modest dining-room had been secured from the repository of the same merchant, and was warranted to have sounded the last domestic hours of Maximilian Robespierre in his humble lodging *chez le Menuisier*. The inkstand into which Mr. Hawkehurst dipped his rapid pen had served the literary career of Voltaire; the blotting-book on which he wrote had been used by Balzac.

To the plausible fictions of the second-hand dealer Mr. and Mrs. Hawkehurst lent willing ears, and it seemed to them as if these associations, for which they had paid somewhat dearly, imparted a new grace to their home.

The arrangement and superintendence of all these treasures gave poor Georgy endless pleasure and employment; but in her

heart of hearts she believed in the prim splendours of the dismantled Lawn as much superior to these second-hand objects of art and upholstery. Nor did Ann Woolper regard the Chelsea figures and Dresden teacups and old black Albert-Dürer engravings as anything better than an innocent eccentricity on the part of the master of the house, for the saving of whose purse she managed and economized as faithfully as she had done for that lost master whereof the memory was so bitter.

It will be seen, therefore, that Mr. Hawkehurst with a wife, a mother-in-law, and a faithful old servant, was likely to be well taken care of; a little spoiled perhaps by "much cherishing," but carefully guarded from all those temptations which are supposed to assail the bachelor man-of-letters, toiling alone and neglected in Temple chambers. For him the days passed in a pleasant monotony of constant labour, lightened always by the thought of those for whom he worked, cheered ever by the fond hope of future fame. He was no longer a bookmaker. He had written a book, the proceeds of which had enabled him to furnish the Wimbledon villa; and he was engaged in writing a second book, the fruits whereof would secure the needs of the immediate future. He had insured his life for a considerable amount, and had shown himself in all things prudent to a degree that verged upon Philistinism. But the policies taken out on Charlotte's life by Mr. Sheldon had been suffered to lapse. Valentine would have no money staked on that dear head.

The steed which Charlotte had desired for her husband's pleasure, the library which she had catalogued so often, were yet among the delights of the future; but life has lost half its brightness when there is no unfulfilled desire left to the dreamer; and the horse which Mr. Hawkehurst was to ride in time to come, and the noble library which he was to collect, were the pleasant themes of Charlotte's conversation very often, as she and her husband walked on the heights of Wimbledon in the twilight, when his day's work was done.

These twilight walks were the happy holidays of his life, and a part of his liberal education. He told his wife everything, every literary scheme, every fancy, every shadowy outline of future work, every new discovery in the boundless realms of Bookland. His enthusiasm; his hero-worship; his setting-up of one favourite and knocking-down of another; his unchristian pleasure in that awful slating of poor Jones in this week's *Saturday*, or the flaying alive of Robinson in the *Bond Street Backbiter*;—in a word, his "shop" never became wearisome to Charlotte. She listened always with a like rapture and sympathy; she worshipped his favourites of Bookland; she wel-

comed his friends and fellow-workers with unvarying sweetness, she devised and superintended the fitting-up of a smoking-room that was perfectly paradisaical, a glimpse of the Alhambra in miniature; and that obnoxious dish, the cold shoulder, was never served in Mr. Hawkehurst's dwelling. So sweet a wife, so pleasant a home, popularized the institution of matrimony among the young writer's bachelor friends; and that much-abused and cruelly maligned member of the human race, the mother-in-law, was almost rehabilitated by Mrs. Sheldon's easy good-nature and evident regard for the interests of her daughter's husband.

And after all the groping among dryasdust records of a bygone century, after all the patient following of those faint traces on the sands of time left by the feet of Matthew Haygarth, *this* was Charlotte's Inheritance,—a heart whose innocence and affection made home a kind of earthly paradise, and gave to life's commonest things a charm that all the gold ever found in California could not have imparted to them. This was Charlotte's Inheritance,—the tender, unselfish nature of the Haygarths and Hallidays; and thus dowered, her husband would not have exchanged her for the wealthiest heiress whose marriage was ever chronicled in *Court Circular* or *Court Journal*.

CHAPTER VIII.

LOST SIGHT OF.

A YEAR and a half had passed since the disappearance of Philip Sheldon from the circle in which he had been considered a person of some importance. The repudiation of those bills by which he had sustained his exhausted credit, or rather the discovery that the companies upon which the bills pretended to be drawn were of all shadows the most shadowy, had brought consternation upon many, and ruin upon some. Bitter and unmeasured were the terms in which City men spoke of that Phil Sheldon with whom they had eaten the sacred bait and quaffed the soci moselle in the taverns of Greenwich and Blackwall.

There is a saying current on the Stock Exchange to the effect that the man who fails, and disappears from among his fellows behind a curtain of commercial cloud, is sure to return sooner or later to his old circle, with a moustache and a brougham. For Philip Sheldon there was, however, no coming back. The moustache and the brougham of the chastened and penitent defaulter were not for him. By his deliberate and notorious dishonour he had shut the door against the possibility of retur

It may be supposed that the defaulter knew this, for he did not come back; and since he had no lack of moral courage, he would scarcely have refrained from showing himself once more in his old haunts, if it had been possible for him to face the difficulties of his position.

Time passed, and there came no tidings of the missing man, though a detective was despatched to America in search of him by one vengeful sufferer among the many victims of the fictitious bills-of-exchange. It was supposed that he must inevitably go to America, and thither went his pursuer, but with no result except the expenditure of money and the further exasperation of the vengeful sufferer.

"What will you do with him, if you get him?" asked a philosophical friend of the sufferer. "He has nothing to surrender. Zabulon had a bill-of-sale on his furniture."

"Furniture!" cried the infuriated victim; "I don't want his furniture. I want his flesh and bones. I want to shut him up in Dartmoor Prison, or to get him twenty years' hard labour at Portland Island."

"That sort of man would get a ticket-of-leave in less than twelve months," replied the philosophic friend. "I'm afraid you are only throwing good money after bad."

The event proved this gentleman but too able a seer. In the monster city of New York Philip Sheldon had disappeared like a single drop of water flung upon the Atlantic Ocean. There was no trace of him: too intangible for the grasp of international law, he melted into the mass of humanity, only one struggler the more in the great army perpetually fighting life's desperate battle.

From among all those who had known him this man had utterly vanished, and not one sigh of regret followed him in his unknown wanderings—not one creature amongst all those who had taken his hand and given him friendly greeting thought of him kindly, or cared to know whither he went or how he prospered. He had not left in the house that had sheltered him for years so much as a dog to whine at his door or listen for his returning footstep.

This fact, if he had known it or considered it, would have troubled him very little. He had played his game for a certain stake, and had lost it. This he felt, and cursed his own too cautious play as the cause of his defeat. That there were higher stakes for which he might have played an easier game, was a fact that never occurred to him. In his philosophy there was indeed nothing higher given to the hopes of man than worldly success, and a dull, cold, prosperous life spent among prosperous acquaintance.

He was gone, and those who remembered him most keenly—Valentine Hawkehurst, Diana Paget, Ann Woolper—remembered him with a shudder. The old Yorkshirewoman thought of him sometimes as she bent over the little muslin-bedecked cradle where the hope of the Hawkehursts slumbered, and looked round fearfully in the gloaming, half expecting to see his dreaded face glower upon her, dark and threatening, from between the curtains of the window.

It was a belief of all ancient races, nay indeed, a belief still current amongst modern nations, that it is not given to man to behold the beings of another world and live. The Arab who meets a phantom in the desert goes home to his tent to die. He knows that the hand of doom is upon him. He has seen that upon which, for mortal eyes, it is fatal to look. And it is thus in some measure with those who are admitted within the dark precincts of murder's dread sanctuary. Not swiftly does the curtain fall which has once been lifted from the hidden horrors of that ghastly temple. The revelations of an utterly wicked soul leave a lasting impress upon the mind which unwillingly becomes recipient of those awful secrets.

The circumstances of Tom Halliday's death and of Charlotte's illness were not to be forgotten by Ann Woolper. The shadow of that dark cruel face, which had lain upon her bosom forty years before, haunted many a peaceful hour of her quiet old age. Her ignorance, and that faint tinge of superstition which generally accompanies ignorance, exaggerated the terror of those dark memories. The thought that Philip Sheldon still lived, still had the power to plot and plan evil against the innocent, was an ever-present source of terror to her. She could not understand that such an element could exist among the forces of evil without fatal result to some one. It seemed to her as if a devil were at large, and there could be neither peace nor security until the evil spirit was exorcised, the baneful presence laid in nethermost depths of unfathomable sea.

These feelings and these fears would scarcely have arisen in the old woman's breast, had she alone been subject to the possible plottings of that evil nature. For herself she had little fear. Her span of life was nearly ended; very few were the sands that had yet to run; and, for her own sake, she would have cared little if some rough hand had spilt them untimely. But a new interest in life had been given to Mrs. Woolper just as life drew near its close. That peerless child, the son and heir of the Hawkehursts, had been intrusted to the old woman's care; and this infant she loved with an affection much more intense than that which had once made Philip Sheldon so dear to her.

It was by the cradle of this much-treasured child that Ann Woolper nursed her fear of her old master. She knew that he had been counter-plotted and beaten ignominiously in that deadly game which he had played so boldly. And she asked herself whether he was the man to submit to such utter defeat without any effort to revenge himself upon those who had helped to compass his failure.

On that night when Charlotte Halliday had lain between life and death, suffering on the one hand from the effects of a prolonged and gradual course of poison, on the other from the violent measures taken to eliminate that poisonous element from her system,—on that night when the precious life yet trembled in the balance, Ann Woolper had seen murderous looks in the face of the man whom she dared boldly to defy, and who knew in that hour that his ghastly plot was discovered. Even now, secure in a haven of safety, she could not forget that baneful look in Philip Sheldon's eyes. She could not find perfect rest while she knew not where that man might be, or what mischief he might be plotting against those she loved.

Her fears showed themselves in many ways. When she read of dark and vengeful deeds in her newspaper, she thought of her old master, and how, in such or such an act, his fatal hand might reveal itself. He might lie in wait for Valentine some night on the dark road between Charlottenburg and the distant railway-station. She could fancy the young wife's agony of terror as the night wore on, and her husband did not return; the unspeakable horror that would come over all that happy household when the news came that its young master had been found on the lonely road slain by some unknown hand. Open utterance to her fears she was too wise to give; but she warned Mr. Hawkehurst of the dangers on that dark road, and besought him to arm himself with a trusty bludgeon wherewith to meet and vanquish any chance assailant. Valentine laughed at her anxious warning; but when Charlotte took up the cry he was fain to content her by the purchase of a sturdy stick, which he swung cheerily to and fro as he walked homewards in the gloaming, planning a chapter in his new book, and composing powerful and eloquent sentences which eluded his mental grasp when he tried to reduce his evening reverie to pen-and-ink.

"When the air blows fresh across the common, and the distant lights twinkle, and the bright stars peep out in the pale-yellow sky, my language flows as it never does when I sit at my desk, Lotta," he said to his wife. "I feel myself a Swift or a Junius out there; equal to the tackling of any social question that ever arose upon this earth, from the Wood halfpence to the policy of American taxation, and triennial elections. At

home I am only Valentine Hawkehurst, with an ever-present consciousness that so many pages of copy are required from me within a given time, and that my son-and-heir is cutting his teeth, and making more fuss about it than *I* ever made about *my* teeth; and that the man about the water-rate is waiting to see me, please, and is desperately anxious about making-up his books; and that I have the dearest wife in Christendom, who opens my door, and puts her pretty head into my room once in half an hour to see how I am getting on, or to ask whether I want any more coals, or to borrow my ink to make-up her washing-book."

"You mean, sir, that I prevent your becoming a Junius?" cried Charlotte, with an enchanting *moue*.

"Yes, dear. I begin to understand why Swift kept his poor ill-used wife at a respectful distance. She would have made him too happy if he had allowed her to be on the premises. She would have given the cruel indignation no chance of lacerating his heart; and such writing as Swift's is only produced by a man whose heart is so lacerated. No, my darling, I shall never be a Swift or a Junius while your pretty head is thrust into my room once or twice an hour; but I may hope to be something better, if bright eyes can inspire bright thoughts, and innocent smiles give birth to pleasant fancies."

Upon this there was the usual little demonstration of affection between this young couple; and Charlotte praised her husband as the most brilliant and admirable of men; after which pleasing flattery she favoured him with a little interesting information about the baby's last tooth, and the contumacious behaviour of the new housemaid, between whom and Mrs. Woolper there had been a species of disagreement, which the Yorkshirewoman described as a "standfurther."

Thus occupied in simple pleasures and simple cares, the lives of Mr. and Mrs. Hawkehurst went on, untroubled by any fear of that crime-burdened wretch whose image haunted the dreams and meditations of Ann Woolper. For these two Mr. Sheldon was numbered among the dead. To Charlotte the actual truth had never been revealed; but she had been, in the course of time, given to understand that her stepfather had committed some unpardonable sin, which must for ever separate him from herself and her mother. She had been told as much as this, and had been told that she must seek to know no more. To this she submitted without questioning.

"I am very sorry for him," she said, "and for mamma."

She concluded that the unpardonable offence must needs have been some sin against her mother, some long-hidden infidelity brought suddenly to light, with all the treachery and falsehood

involved therein. She never mentioned her stepfather after this; but in her prayers the sinner was not forgotten.

CHAPTER IX.

ETEOCLES AND POLYNICES.

GEORGE SHELDON went his ways, picking up as good a living as he could from that chivalrous assertion of the rights of the weak which has been already described; and the thought of his brother's sin-burdened soul troubled him very little. He did think of Tom Halliday; for that last grasp of the honest Yorkshireman's hand, that last look in his old friend's face, were haunting memories which this sharp practitioner had found himself powerless to exorcise. If his brother, after an absence of many years in the remote regions of the East Indies, had come home to his fatherland with a colossal fortune, and the reputation of having strangled a few natives during the process of amassing that fortune, George Sheldon would have welcomed the returning wanderer, and would, in his own parlance, have "swallowed the natives." A few niggers, more or less, sent untimely to Gehenna, would have seemed scarcely sufficient cause for quarrel with a fraternal and liberally-disposed millionaire. But the circumstances of Tom Halliday's death had brought all the horror of crime and treachery home to the spectator of that deliberate assassination, and had produced such an impression as no other circumstances could on so hard a nature.

It was some satisfaction to George Sheldon to know that his old friend's daughter had found a happy home; and he was apt to take some credit from his own share in his brother's discomfiture. He met Valentine sometimes in the course of his peregrinations in the neighbourhood of the British Museum, and the greeting between the two men was sufficiently cordial; but Mr. Hawkehurst did not invite his old employer to Charlottenburg, and George was able to comprehend that to that household no one bearing the name of Sheldon could be a welcome visitor.

He jogged on comfortably enough in his own way; living in his chambers, and consorting with a few chosen friends and kindred spirits of the jolly-good-fellow class, whom he met at an old-established tavern in the west-central district, and in whose society, and the society of the subscription-ground in the Farringdon Road, he found the *summum bonum* in the way of social intercourse. He did a little speculation upon the turf,

and discounted the bills of needy bookmakers, or bought up their bad debts, and thereby gained introductions to the noble patrons of the humble "scums," and pushed his business into new grooves. He had no idea that such an existence was in any way ignoble; nay, indeed, when he had paid his rent, and his clerk, and his laundress, and his tavern score, and "stood glasses round" amongst his friends, he lighted his cigar, and thrust his hands into the depths of his pockets, and paced the flags of Holborn happy in the belief that he had performed the whole duty of man.

"There are men whose business obliges them to keep up an establishment, and go to church twice a day, and all that kind of thing," he said; "and I dare say they find it pay. My clients don't care a doit where I live, or how I spend my Sundays; and I'd rather have five pounds a week and my liberty than the best family connection in the Fields."

The fate of that wretched man, who had dropped out of his old circle and vanished no one knew whither, in no manner disturbed the peace of George Sheldon.

"Take my word for it, that gentleman has fallen on his feet," he said, on the only occasion when the fate of Philip was discussed by Valentine and himself. "He's doing well enough, somewhere or other, you may depend; but I don't think he'll ever be able to show his nose in London after those bill transactions. There's a very strong feeling against him on Change. He's looked upon as a discredit to the order, and that sort of thing, you see. It isn't often a member of the House goes to the bad like that. No, I don't think Phil will ever show himself in London again; but such a man as that can always find a platform somewhere——"

"And go on to the end of his days unpunished, I suppose," remarked Mr. Hawkehurst, with some bitterness.

"Well, yes; I don't see what's to touch him in the future. Of course he could be dropped upon for those bills, if he came in the way of being dropped upon; but, as I said before, he's too deep a card for that."

Thus did George Sheldon dismiss the subject. That his brother was an exile for life from his native land he did not doubt; but he took it for granted that in whatever distant spot of earth Philip had found a refuge, he would there contrive to prosper and to show a bold front in the city of his adoption.

This belief Mr. Sheldon of Gray's Inn cherished until one snowy Christmas Eve, a year and a half after that event, or series of events, which the lawyer briefly designated "the burst-up at Bayswater."

Bleak and bitter was that December, a December not long

gone by. The heart of the prosperous British nation melted as the heart of one man. The columns of the *Zeus* and the *Diurnal Hermes*, the *Flag* and the *Hesper*, overflowed with the record of subscriptions to charity funds; and the leaders of the morning journals all preached the same kindly sermon on the same Christian text. Thick lay the snow upon the house-tops; "thick and slab" the greasy slush upon the pavements of crowded thoroughfares; merry the rogues and ragamuffins of the great city. The ideal Christmas of our dreams seemed to have come at last, and the heart of every true Briton rejoiced; while skaters in the parks made merry, and cabmen demanded fabulous sums of helpless wayfarers; and luckless, overworked, under-fed horses stumbled and fell at every turn, and the familiar steep of Holborn was dangerous as Alpine mountain.

To George Sheldon neither the weather nor the Christmas season made much difference. The even current of his life was little disturbed by festive pleasures or dissipations. An extra glass at his tavern, an invitation to dinner from some friend in the bill-discounting line, were the most exciting events the season was likely to bring him. He saw the shops brighten suddenly with semi-supernal glories of crystallized fruits and gorgeous bonbon-boxes, and he was aware of a kind of movement in the streets that was brisker and gayer than the plodding hurry of everyday life. He stood aside and let the mummeries go by him, and was glad when these Christmas follies were done with, and the law-courts in full swing once more. In the happiest and most innocent days of his youth, Christmas had brought him no more than extraordinary indulgences in the way of eating and drinking, swiftly followed by that dread avenger, the demon of the bilious.

Upon this particular occasion Mr. Sheldon had pledged himself to dine with a horsey publican lately retired from business, and big with all the pride and glory of a "place" at Hornsey.

"Come down and see my place, Sheldon," this gentleman had said. "I don't pretend to do the swell thing; but I force my own pines and grow my own grapes, and can put as good a dessert on my table as you could buy in Covent Garden for a five-pun' note. That's my missus's fad, that is, and I can afford it; so why shouldn't I do it? You come and eat your Christmas dinner with us, Sheldon. I've got a friend coming that can sing as good a song as Reeves hisself, and might make a fortune, if he wasn't above coming out at one of them music-halls. And I'll give you a bottle of Madeira that you won't match at any nobleman's table, if noblemen's tables was in your line of business, which you and I know they ain't, old fellow."

And then the jolly good fellow dug his fat fingers into George Sheldon's ribs, and George accepted the invitation; not with any elation of spirits, but sufficiently pleased to secure a good dinner with a man who promised to be a profitable client, and whose house was within a reasonable cab-fare from the west-central district.

"The cabmen are trying it on, anyhow, just now," thought Mr. Sheldon; "but I don't think they'll try it on with me. And if they do, there's the Marylebone stage. I'm not afraid of a five-mile walk."

Having accepted this invitation, and thus disposed of his Christmas-day, George Sheldon refrained from the delights of social converse at his tavern on Christmas-eve, and occupied himself with business. His clerk left him at the usual hour; but the master sat, long after dark, writing letters and reading law-papers, while the snow drifted against his windows and whitened the quiet quadrangle below.

He had just laid aside his papers and lighted a cigar, when he was startled by a stealthy knocking at his door. He was not unaccustomed to late visitors, as he was known to live at his chambers, and to work after office-hours; but the knocking of to-night was not the loud rollicking rat-a-tat of his jolly-good-fellow friends or clients. If he had been a student of light literature, and imbued with the ghostly associations of the season, he would have gone to his door expecting to behold a weird figure clothed in the vestments of the last century; or an old woman in ruff and martingale, whose figure in the flesh had once haunted those legal precincts; or the ghostly semblance of the Baron of Verulam himself, revisiting the glimpses of the moon and the avenue of elms that were planted by his order.

In George Sheldon's nature there was, however, no lurking dread of fiend or phantom. His ideas in connection with ghosts were limited to a white sheet, a broomstick, and a hollow turnip with a lighted candle inside it; and he would have set down the most awful apparition that ever was revealed to German ghost-seer, with a scornful grin, as a member of the sheet and-hollow-turnip confraternity.

"I know how it's done," he would have said, if the spectral form had glowered upon him in midnight churchyard or ruined abbey. "You'd better go and try it on somewhere else, my friend."

To a superstitious mind the THING which crept across the dark lobby and dragged itself into the glare of the gas-lighted office might have seemed, indeed, some creature too loathsome for humanity. A plague-stricken corpse galvanized into a

spasmodic life could scarcely have lifted to the light a more awful countenance than that on which George Sheldon looked with mingled anger and disgust.

"What do you want here?" he asked. "Do you take this for the workhouse?"

"No," the creature answered, in a faint hoarse voice; "but I take you for my brother."

"WHAT!" cried George Sheldon, aghast.

He bent down and looked at the awful face. Yes, from the cavernous hollows of those sunken cheeks, beneath the shaggy penthouse of those bony brows, the fierce black eyes of Philip Sheldon looked out at him with a savage glare that he had never seen in them before—even when the savage nature of the man had revealed itself most nakedly—the fierce glare of fever and starvation.

This walking horror, this mass of loathsome rags endued with motion, this living disease, was the sometime prosperous stock-broker, the man whom it had been impossible to think of except furnished with linen of spotless whiteness, and the glossy broad-cloth, and well-made boots, and keyless chronometer, and silk umbrella of commercial success.

"Good God!" exclaimed George, horror-stricken, "is it you?"

"Yes, it's I," answered the creature in his strange husky accents; and the change—nay, indeed, the degradation, of the voice was as complete as the degradation of the man. "Yes, George, it's I; your brother Phil. You're surprised to see me fallen so low in the world, I suppose; but you can't be more surprised than I am myself. I've tried hard enough to hold my head above water. There's scarcely any trade that mortal man ever tried to earn his bread by, that I haven't tried—and failed in. It has been the experience of Fitzgeorge-street over and over again, in every trade and every profession. I started as doctor in Philadelphia, and was doing well;—till—till a patient died—and things went against me. I've been clerk in more offices than you can count on your ten fingers; but there was always something—my employer levanted, or was bankrupt, or died, or dismissed me. I've been travelling-dentist, auctioneer, commission-agent, tout, pedlar, out yonder; but it all came to the same thing—ruin, starvation, the hospital, or the pauper's ward. I have swept crossings in the city, and camped out in the wilderness among the bears and opossums. One day I thought I'd come home. 'There's George,' I said to myself; 'if I can get money enough to take me across the Atlantic, I shall be all right. George will give me a lift.' I don't stand alone in the world. A man's own flesh and blood won't let him starve—*can't* let him starve. Blood's thicker than water, you know,

George. So I came home. I got the money; never you mind how. I needn't tell you what it cost me to scrape half-a-dozen pounds together. When a man's as low down in the world as I am, there's not a shilling he earns that doesn't cost him a drop of his heart's blood; there's not a pound he gets together that isn't bought by the discount of so much of his life. I found money enough for my passage in an emigrant vessel; and here I am, ready for anything. I'll work like your bought nigger. I'll do the work your clerk does for a quarter of his wages. I'll sweep out your office, and run errands for you. You'll give me something to keep body and soul together, won't you, George?"

Nothing could be more utterly abject than the tone of this most abject wretch.

This man, who in prosperity had been the very personification of hardness and insolence, was transformed into a grovelling, cringing supplicant, ready to lie face downward in the dust beneath the feet of that brother whose patronage, or charity, he besought.

Mr. Sheldon the younger contemplated the supplicant with looks of undisguised gratification. He walked a few paces backward from the spot where his brother had fallen, in a half-sitting, half-crouching attitude, and where he remained, hugging himself in his rags, too abject to be acutely conscious of his degradation A year ago and he would have held himself obstinately aloof from all old associations, and would have declared himself ready to face starvation, rather than accept, still less supplicate, relief from his younger brother. The events of that one year had involved alternations and convulsions that change a year into a cycle. He had faced starvation; he had walked with hunger for his travelling companion; he had lain down night after night in such lairs as the tramp can find for his refuge, with sickness and pain for his bed-fellows. The crucible through which he had passed had left in him no more of humanity than its outward semblance, and scarcely that; for when the moral man sinks to the level of the beasts of prey, the physical man undergoes an assimilative process only less marked than that which transforms the mental nature.

For six months this man had lived by fawning upon or threatening his fellow-men; by violence or craft; by the degradation of the vagrant or the audacity of the thief. There is no limit to man's capacity for infamy which he had not touched. Vilest amongst the vile, he had been cast forth from the haunts of beggars and reprobates, as no fitting company for honourable thieves or cadgers of good repute.

George Sheldon seated himself astride upon a chair, and, with his folded arms resting on the back of it, contemplated this

hideous spectacle. It was a picture that he had never thought to see, and the feeling with which he surveyed it was not unmingled with pleasure.

"When you rode me rough-shod, my friend, I used to think how I should enjoy taking my change out of you," he said; "but I never thought I should have such an opportunity as this—never, by Jove! I thought you would ride the high horse to the end of the journey; I didn't think your steed would land you in the gutter. And so you've tried every move, have you?—tumbled upon every platform?—and you've found all your cleverness no go upon the other side of the three thousand miles of everlasting wet, as my Yankee friends call the Atlantic; and you've come back whining to me, and I'm to help you, am I, and to give you a fresh start in life, I suppose, and make you my clerk, or my junior partner, eh?—that would be better. Messrs. Sheldon and Sheldon wouldn't look bad on my door. That's about what you mean when you talk of blood being thicker than water, isn't it?"

The abject wretch who had once been Philip Sheldon felt that his brother was trifling with him, savouring to the last drop that cup of triumph which the chances of fortune had offered to his lips.

"Don't play the fool with me, George," he said piteously. "I don't ask you much—a crust of bread, a corner to sleep in, and a cast-off suit of clothes: that's not much for one brother to ask of another."

"Perhaps not," replied George Sheldon; "but it's a great deal for you to ask of me. You've had your turn, Phil; and you made the most of it, and contrived to keep me at arm's length. My turn has come at last, and you may depend upon it I shall contrive now to keep *you* at arm's length."

The vagrant stared at him aghast. Here he had felt secure of food and shelter; and he had endured miseries and deprivations that reduce a man to a state in which food and shelter seem to constitute the supreme good that can be obtained in this life.

"You won't refuse to do something for me, George," he whined piteously.

"I will do nothing for you. Do you hear that, my man? Nothing! You taught me that blood is *not* thicker than water twelve years ago, when you married Tom Halliday's widow, and drew your purse-strings, after flinging me a beggarly hundred as you'd throw a bone to a dog. You made me understand that was all I should ever get out of your brotherly love, or your fear of my telling the world *what I knew*. You gave me a dinner now and then, because it suited you to keep your eye upon me;

and you had generally some piece of dirty work on hand that made the advice of a sharp practitioner like me uncommonly useful to you. I don't believe that you ever gave me so much as a dinner that you didn't take payment for in meal or in malt. Don't come howling here now, trying to persuade me that blood *is* thicker than water, or that brotherhood means anything more than the accident of birth. And now I've said all I have to say; and the sooner you make yourself scarce, the better for both of us."

"George!" cried the miserable suppliant, clasping his bony hands convulsively, and whimpering as he had whimpered when he begged his bread in the streets of New York, "you can't mean to turn me out of doors on such a night. Look at me. It was as much as I could do to crawl to this room. I have walked every step of the way from Liverpool; my wretched limbs have been frost-bitten, and ulcered, and bruised, and racked with rheumatism, and bent double with cramp. I came over in an emigrant vessel, with a herd of miserable creatures who had tried their luck on the other side of the Atlantic, and had failed, like me, and were coming home to their native workhouses. You don't know what some of your emigrant ships are, perhaps. People talk about the Black Hole of Calcutta, and the Middle Passage; but let them try the cabin of an emigrant vessel, and they'll have a pretty fair idea of what human beings have to suffer when Poverty drives the ship. I landed in Liverpool with half-a-dollar in my pocket, and I've had neither decent food nor decent shelter since I landed. Give me some hole to lie in, George, till you can get me an order for the nearest hospital. It's a toss-up whether I ever come out of it."

"Do you think I'd sleep under the roof that sheltered *you?*" cried George.

"Why not?"

"Why not! Because I'm afraid of you. Because I'd as soon have a cobra for my companion, or a wolf for my bedfellow. I know you. I've seen what you can do, and how you can do it. And if you could do those things when the only pressure upon you was one that you could have cast off by going through the *Gazette*, what would you *not* do now when you are as desperate as a famished wolf, and governed by no better law than that which governs a wolf—the law of self-preservation? Am I to trust a tiger because he tells me he is hungry? No, Phil Sheldon; neither will I trust you."

"You will give me some money—enough to keep me alive for a week or two."

"Not one sixpence. I'll establish no precedent; I'll acknowledge no tie between us. You'd better march. I don't want to

send for a policeman; but if you won't go quietly, you must do the other thing."

"You mean that?"

"Most emphatically yes."

"I didn't think it was in you to be so hard upon me," faltered the wretch in that faint hoarse voice which had grown fainter and hoarser during this interview.

"Did you think that I would trust you?" cried George. "Trust *you!* You call me hard because I won't give you a corner to lie in. And if I did, you would creep out of your corner to poison me, or cut my throat. You would crawl into my room in the dead of the night and put a pillow over my face, and kneel upon it till you'd done the trick for *me;* and then you'd walk off with as much as you could carry, and begin the same kind of work over again with some one else. I tell you, Mr. Phil Sheldon, I will hold no intercourse with you. You've escaped hanging, but there's something that's worse than hanging, to my mind, and that is the state of a man whom nobody will trust. You've come to that; and if you had a spark of gentlemanly feeling, you'd have bought two-pennyworth of rope and hung yourself rather than come cringing to me."

"Suppose I don't cringe," said the outcast, dropping the fawning tone of the mendicant for the threatening ferocity of the social wolf; "you'd better give me a trifle to keep body and soul together for the next few weeks. I'm a desperate man, George! You and I are alone up here. You are pretty sure to have ready money about you. And there's your watch; that's worth something. I didn't come here to go away empty-handed. AND I WON'T!"

He sprang to his feet, and in the next moment the lawyer heard the sharp clicking noise made by the opening of a clasp-knife.

"O," cried he, "that's what you want, is it!"

He bent over his desk, with his eyes fixed on those other evil eyes that still retained some likeness to his own, and with his left arm raised in a boxer's defensive attitude, to guard his head, while his right hand groped for something in a drawer. It was a moment's work. Philip had seized that uplifted left arm, and was hanging on to it like a cat, with his knife between his teeth, when George clapped the muzzle of a revolver to his brow.

"There are plenty of wild beasts in London besides you," he said, "and I am not such a fool as to be without the means of settling a chance visitor of your sort. Drop your knife, and march."

The outcast dropped his knife submissively. He was too weak for anything more than a spasmodic violence.

"Take your pistol away from my head," he whined.

"Certainly, when you are outside my door."

"You might give me a handful of silver, George. I haven't a week's life left in me."

"All the better for society if you hadn't an hour's life in you. Be off. I'm tired of holding this revolver to your head, and I don't mean to let it go till you're off my premises."

Philip saw that there was no hope. Food and shelter were all he had hoped for; but even these blessings were not for him. He backed out of the office, closely followed by George, holding the muzzle of the revolver within an inch or so of the fraternal brains. Upon the threshold only did he pause.

"Tell me one thing," he said. "You won't give me sixpence to buy a loaf of bread or a glass of gin. Give me one scrap of comfort. It need cost you nothing. Tell me something bad of Valentine Hawkehurst: that he's gone to the dogs, or drowned himself; that his wife has run away from him, or his house been burned to the ground. Tell me that he's had a taste of my luck; and that Ann Woolper has died in a workhouse. It will be as good as meat and drink to me, and it will cost you nothing."

"If I told you anything of the kind, I should tell you a lie. Valentine Hawkehurst is doing uncommonly well, and has got one of the prettiest little boxes between Wimbledon and Kingston. Ann Woolper lives with them, and is in better feather than she ever was in your time."

With this, Mr. Sheldon of Gray's Inn pushed his brother out on to the staircase, and shut his door. Philip sat upon the stairs, and drew his rags together a little, and rubbed his wretched limbs, while the bolts and chains whereby the lawyer defended his citadel clanked close behind him.

"I wonder whether he'll pay Hawkehurst a visit," thought George, as he bolted his door; and he had a kind of grim satisfaction in the idea that Valentine's Christmas peace might be disturbed by the advent of that grisly visitor.

CHAPTER X.

"ACCORDING TO THEIR DEEDS."

"BETWEEN Wimbledon and Kingston," muttered the tramp. "If I can drag myself as far as that, I'll go there this night."

He went down stairs and out into the pitiless cold and snow, and made his way down Fetter Lane, and across Blackfriars Bridge to the Surrey side of the water, stopping to beg here and there.

Upon this snowy Christmas night there were plenty of people abroad; and amongst them Philip Sheldon found pitying matrons, who explored the depths of their capacious pockets to find him a halfpenny, and good-natured young men, who flung the "copper" he besought with piteous professional whine.

When he had collected the price of a glass of gin, he went into the first public-house he came to, and spent his money. He was too ill to stay the cravings of his stomach with substantial food. Gin gave him temporary warmth and temporary strength, and enabled him to push on vigorously for a little while; and then came dreary periods of faintness and exhaustion, in which every step was sheer pain and weariness.

Something of his old self, some remnant of that hard strength of purpose which had once characterized him, remained with him still, utterly fallen and brutalized as he was. As a savage creature of the jungle might pursue a given course, pushing always onward to that camp or village whence the scent of human flesh and blood was wafted to his quivering nostrils, so Philip Sheldon pushed on towards the dwelling-place of that man and that woman whom of all creatures upon this earth he most savagely hated.

"There's nothing left for me but to turn housebreaker," he said to himself; "and the first house I'll try my hand upon shall be Valentine Hawkehurst's."

The idea of violence in such a creature was the idea of a madman. Weapon he had none, nor the physical strength that would have enabled him to grapple with a boy of twelve years old. Half intoxicated with the spirits he had consumed on his long tramp, half delirious with fever, he had a vague notion that he could make an entrance into some ill-defended house under cover of night, and steal something that should procure him food and shelter. And let the house be Valentine Hawkehurst's, the man who had baffled his plans and crushed him!

If blood must be shed, let the blood be his! Never was man better primed for murder than the man who tramped across Wimbledon Common at eleven o'clock this night, with the snow drifting against his face, and his limbs shaken every now and then by an ague-fit.

Happily for the interests of society, his hand lacked the power to execute that iniquity which his heart willed.

He reached a little wayside inn near the Robin Hood gate of Richmond Park, just as the shutters were being closed, and asked a man if any one of the name of Hawkehurst lived in that neighbourhood.

"What do *you* want with Mr. Hawkehurst?" asked the man, contemptuously.

"I've got a letter for him."

"Have you? A begging letter, I should think, from the look of you."

"No; it's a business letter. You'd better show me where he lives, if he's a customer of yours. The business is particular."

"Is it? You're a queer kind of messenger to trust with particular business. Mr. Hawkehurst's house is the third you come to on the opposite side of the way. But I don't suppose you'll find anybody up as late as this. Their lights are out by eleven, in a general way."

The third house on the opposite side of the road was half a mile distant from the little inn. Lights shone bright in the lower windows as the tramp dragged his tired limbs to the stout oaken gate. The gate was fastened only by a latch, and offered no resistance to the intruder. He crept with stealthy footsteps along the smooth gravel walk, sheltered by dark laurels, on which the light flashed cheerily from those bright windows. Sounds of laughter and of music pealed out upon the wintry air. Shadows flitted across the blinds of the broad bay windows. Philip Sheldon crept into a sheltered nook beside the rustic porch, and sank down exhausted in the shadow of the laurels.

He sat there in a kind of stupor. He had lost the power of thought, somehow, on that dreary journey. It seemed almost as if he had left some portion of his being out yonder in the cold and darkness. He had difficulty in remembering why he had come to this place, and what that deed was which he meant to do.

"Hawkehurst," he muttered to himself—"Hawkehurst, the man who leagued against me with Jedd! I swore to be even with him if ever I found the opportunity—if ever! And George refused me a few shillings; my brother, my only brother, refused to stand my friend!"

Hawkehurst and George—his only brother—the images of

these two men floated confusedly in his brain: he could scarcely separate them. Sometimes it seemed to him that he was still sitting outside his brother's door, on the staircase in Gray's Inn, hugging himself in his rags, and cursing his unnatural kinsman's cruelty; then in the next moment he remembered where he was, and breathed bitter curses upon that unconscious enemy whose laugh pealed out every now and then amid a chorus of light-hearted laughter.

There was a little Christmas party at Charlottenburg. Two flys were waiting in the laurel-avenue to convey Mr. Hawkehurst's guests to distant abodes. The door was opened presently, and all the bustle of departure made itself heard by that wretched wayfarer who found it so difficult to keep his hold upon the consciousness of these things.

"What is it?" he said to himself—"a party! Hawkehurst has been giving a party."

He had lived through too much degradation, he had descended into too deep a gulf of wretchedness, to be conscious of the contrast between his present situation and his position in those days when *he* had played the host, and seen handsome carriages bear prosperous guests away from his door. In that cycle of misery which he had endured, these things and the memory of them had faded from him as completely as if they had been obliterated by the passage of a century. The hapless wretch tried to give sustained attention to all the animated discussion that attended the departure of the merry guests. Half-a-dozen people seemed to be talking at once. Valentine was giving his friends counsel about the way home.

"You will keep to the lower road, you know, Fred. Lawsley's cab can follow yours. You came a couple of miles out of your way. And tell that fellow Battersea Bridge is a mistake."

And then followed Charlotte's friendly questioning about wraps, and hoods, and comforters, and other feminine gear.

"And when are you coming to dine at Fulham?" cried one voice.

"I shall certainly get those quadrilles of Offenbach's," said another.

"How delightfully Mr. Lawsley sang that song of Santley's!"

And anon a chorus of "Never enjoyed myself more!" "Most delightful evening!" "Pray don't come out in the cold." "Thanks; well, yes, yours are always capital." "No, I won't light up till I'm on the road." "Give my book a lift in the *D. H.*, eh, old fellow?" "Are you *quite* sure that shawl is warm enough?" "Take a rug for your feet." "Thanks, no." "Good-night." "See you on Tuesday." "Don't forget the

box for D. L." "All right, old fellow!" "Lower Road, Roehampton Lane, Putney Bridge. Good-night."

Among the confusion of voices Philip Sheldon had recognized more than one voice that was familiar to him. There were Charlotte's gentle tones, and Valentine's hearty barytone, and another that he knew.

Diana Paget! Yes, it was her voice. Diana Paget, whom he had cause to hate for her interference with his affairs.

"A beggar," he muttered to himself, "and the daughter of a beggar! She was a nice young lady to set herself in opposition to the man who gave her a home."

The vehicles drove away, but there was still a little group in the rustic porch. Valentine and Charlotte, with Monsieur and Madame Lenoble, who had come to spend their Christmas with their English friends.

"How we have been gay this evening!" cried Gustave. "There is nothing like your English interior for that which you call the comfortable, the jolly, you others. Thy friends are the jollity itself, Hawkehurst. And our acting charades, when that we all talked at once, and with a such emphasis on the word we would make to know. Was it not that our spectators were cunning to divine the words? And your friend Lawsley—it is a mixture of Got and Sanson. It is a true genius. Think, then, Diane, while we were amusing ourselves, our girls were at the midnight mass at the Sacré Cœur? Dear pious children, their innocent prayers ascended towards the heavens for we who are absent. Come, Madame Hawkehurst, Diane, it makes cold."

"But we are sheltered here. And the stars are so bright after the snow," said Charlotte. "Do you remember the Christmas-day you spent at the Lawn, Valentine, when we walked in Kensington Gardens together, just when we were first engaged?" the young wife added shyly.

"Do I not remember? It was the first time the holiness of Christmas came home to my heart. And now let us go back to the drawing-room, and sit round the fire, and tell ghost stories. Lenoble shall give us the legends of Côtenoir."

"Valentine," murmured Charlotte, "do you know that it is nearly one o'clock?"

"And we must put in an appearance at church to-morrow morning. And Lenoble has to walk to Kingston to early mass. We will postpone our ghost stories to New-Year's eve. And Lenoble shall read Tennyson's *New Year*, to demonstrate his improvement in the English language. Lead the way, Mrs. Hawkehurst; your obedient slave obeys. Mamma is waiting

for us in the drawing-room, marvelling at our delay, no doubt. And Nancy Woolper stalks ghost-like through the house, oppressed by the awful responsibility of to-morrow's pudding."

Anon came a clanking of bolts and bars; and Philip Sheldon, for the second time that night, heard a door shut against him. As the voices died away, his consciousness of external things died with him. He fancied himself on the Gray's-Inn staircase.

"Don't be so hard upon me, George," he muttered faintly. "If my own kith and kin turn against *me*, whom shall I look to?"

Mrs. Woolper opened the door early next day, when night was yet at odds with morning. All through the night the silent snow-flakes had been falling thick and fast; and they had woven the shroud of Philip Sheldon. The woman who had watched his infant slumbers forty years before, was the first to look upon him in that deeper sleep, of whose waking we know so little. It was not until she had looked long and closely at the dead face that she knew why it was that the aspect of that countenance had affected her with so strange a pang. She did recognize that altered wretch, and kept her counsel.

Before the bells rang for morning service the tramp was lying in the dead-house of Kingston Union, whither he had been conveyed very quietly in the early morning, unknown to any one but the constable who superintended the removal, and the servants of Mr. Hawkehurst's household. Only the next day did Ann Woolper tell Valentine what had happened. There was to be an inquest. It would be well that some one should identify the dead man, and establish the fact of Philip Sheldon's decease.

Valentine was able to do this unaided. He attended the inquest, and made arrangements for the outcast's decent burial; and in due course he gave Mrs. Sheldon notice of her freedom.

Beyond that nameless grave whose fancy shall dare follow Philip Sheldon? He died and made no sign. And in the last dread day, when the dead, small and great, from the sea and from the grave, press together at the foot of the great white Throne, and the books of doom are opened; when above shines the city whose light is the glory of God, and below yawns the lake of fire,—what voice shall plead for Philip Sheldon, what entreating cry shall Pity send forth that sentence against him may be stayed?

Surely none; unless it issue from the lips of that one confiding friend, whose last words upon earth thanked and blessed him, and whose long agonies he watched with unshaken purpose,

conscious that in every convulsive change in the familiar face and every pang that shook the stalwart form, he saw the result of his own work.

Perhaps at that dread Judgment Day, when every other tongue is silent, the voice of Tom Halliday may be heard pleading for the man who murdered him.

THE END

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